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**WAIT FOR THE
DEAD MAN'S
TIDE!**

by **DAY KEENE**

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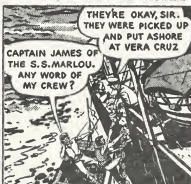
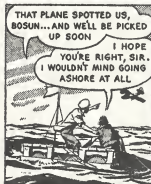
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NEXT ISSUE OUT SEPTEMBER 2nd!

Volume 38

August, 1949

Number 4

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POPULAR FILMS

Good Movie-Going For Fiction Fans Ted Palmer Picks:

For Comedy-Romance: "The Beautiful Blonde from Bashful Bend" with Betty Grable, Cesar Romero, Rudy Vallee and Olga San Juan (20th Century-Fox). Technicolor.



Beautiful, blonde, gun-happy Freddie Jones (Betty Grable) gets out of town fast after accidentally shooting the Honorable Judge Alfalfa O'Toole in the seat of his pants. Fleeing on a train, she is mistaken by the conductor for "little Hilda Swandumper from Bashful Bend" on her way to teach at Snake City. This is good enough for Freddie—only she knows nothing about school teaching. Charlie Hingelman (Rudy Vallee), under her charms, gives her a few lessons in teaching at night. Freddie's past, however, in the form of Blackie (Cesar Romero), catches up with her. Through a succession of hilarious events, the town is set afeudin', and Freddie gets taken back for trial. She almost goes free when Blackie offers to marry her, but Freddie finishes that by shooting at the judge again. Where and when? Why, in the end, of course. *Good spoofing with lots of broad laughs.*

For Adventure—"Illegal Entry" with Howard Duff, Marta Toren and George Brent (Universal). To assist Immigration Inspector Dan Collins (George Brent) break up a gang that smuggles aliens across the Mexican border by plane, Burt Powers (Howard Duff) gets hired by the gang as a pilot. Lucky for him that Anna Duvak (Marta Toren)—an unwilling gang member—tips him off on a trap to test his loyalty. Otherwise, he wouldn't be able to break the gang up and get the girl. *A semi-documentary with good, fast action.*



For Murder Mystery—"Manhandled" with



Dorothy Lamour, Sterling Hayden, and Dan Duryea (Paramount).

A hard-pressed author, worried about a recurrent nightmare in which he kills his wife for her jewelry, visits a psychiatrist to get things off his chest. The psychiatrist's secretary, Merl Kramer (Dorothy Lamour), mentions this dream to Karl Benson (Dan Duryea), a private investigator, and a chain of events are set off which lead to murder of the wife, theft of the jewels and some of the dirtiest double-dealing you've seen in some time. Sterling Hayden is the insurance investigator who works on the case. *A film, well-played for suspense, with a neat, ironical wind-up.*

• • •

For Sports—"The Stratton Story" with James Stewart and June Allyson (MGM).



One of the pluckiest stories in sports is retold in this film version of the life of Monty Stratton—brilliant young Chicago White Sox pitcher who lost his leg in a hunting accident after the 1938 major league season. Overcoming this handicap, Stratton learned to use an artificial leg, and in 1946 pitching in the East Texas League, he won 18 games. Although Hollywood over-sentimentalizes the story, this remains a good baseball picture. Jimmy Stewart plays Stratton, June Allyson, his wife, while Gene Bearden, Jimmy Dykes, Bill Dickey and Mervyn Shea lend authenticity to baseball sequences. *It makes a pleasant evening.*

• • •

For A Western—"The Younger Brothers" with Wayne Morris and Janis Page (Warners). Technicolor.



The four Younger brothers, who were once the "Dead End" kids of the West, along with Jesse James and his gang, find it's tough to go straight herein. A vindictive police officer, leading a misguided posse, and a beautiful, female outlaw leader both try to get the boys in trouble. Some good straight-shooting, hard riding and quick thinking save the day. *It has all you want in a Western.*

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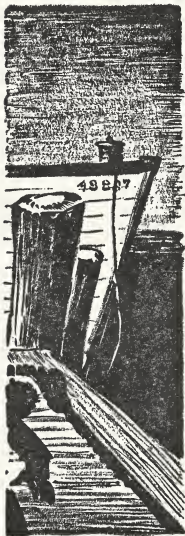
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WAIT FOR THE DEAD MAN'S TIDE!

By DAY KEENE

"Who are you?" Ames demanded. The blackjack cut viciously at him for answer.





There was only one way Charlie Ames could beat that murder rap for his young and beautiful wife, but Charlie didn't like it. Which wasn't strange, because Charlie's job was a simple matter of bringing back the soaking-wet corpse—and then killing him all over again!

Blood-Tingling Novel of the Dead Who Return

CHAPTER ONE

Strange Awakening

THE BODY lay like a swimmer in the water, face down, one arm extended. The moon peering through a rift in the clouds found fire on one finger of the outstretched hand. It glittered

and twinkled and flared. Even the full force of the out-going tide surging through the narrow pass leading out into the Gulf failed to extinguish it. It seemed to be embedded in the dead man's hand, a spark of life in the water-logged clay.

For a time the body made good progress. It bobbed past the pier of the Beach Club and the swank homes on the rim of the bay. It glided past Bill's Boat Basin and the dozen small bait camps that adjoined it. Here and there on both sides of the pass, lights winked on as commercial fishermen and bait camp proprietors awoke grudgingly to prepare for the new day. A late-returning shrimper chugged under one of the high arches of the bridge. Early bridge and outboard-motor fishermen parked their cars and drank their breakfasts out of bottles in an attempt to ward off the cool of morning. But none of them saw the body.

It was headed under an arch of the bridge out into the open Gulf with the next land Yucatan when the tide turned. The moving body lost forward motion. It twisted and turned in a small circle, then rested against a barnacle-covered bridge piling.

But with the rush of the incoming tide, the force of the water tore it from the piling and carried it back the way it had come, back past the bait camps, the boat basin, the sleeping estates, the Beach Club, into the even blacker, if more tranquil, waters of the upper bayou. There it snagged on a mangrove root, to be circled about and nosed curiously by the small fish of the bay.

It made no difference to them that the spark of fire, burning red on the dead man's finger, was a diamond appraised at eighteen thousand dollars.

"WE'LL have bacon and eggs and grits for breakfast," Mary Lou decided. Perhaps she might even whip up a batch of biscuits. A man who worked as

hard as Charlie did had a right to a big breakfast. Anyone who thought running a charter fishing boat was a lazy man's job was out of his ignorant mind. Especially an old tub like the *Sally*. If it wasn't the engine it was the bottom. If it wasn't the bottom it was a bilge pump or a rotted rudder post or a leak in the live bait well.

If she could only keep on singing at the Beach Club until the end of the season, they would be able to buy a new boat. She lay looking up into the dark, thinking about that, listening to the drip of the condensation top-side, hearing the surge of the incoming tide, sniffing the new day.

Charlie didn't like her to work at the Beach Club. She didn't like to work there. The singing wasn't so bad. She liked to sing. She didn't even mind acting as hostess. It gave her a taste of a life she otherwise would never have known. If only the rich old billy goats who could afford to patronize the place would learn to keep their hands and their thoughts to themselves, it wouldn't be so bad. They thought just because they had money and a girl sang torch songs on a bandstand and was willing to sit at their tables, that she could be pawed and insulted and propositioned.

Maybe once she would have enjoyed those attentions. But that was in the past, before she had met Charlie, before they had been married. Now he was her only love. He always would be.

She was tempted to slip out of her bunk and wake him up, just to tell him that. But he had a charter party at nine and he had probably been netting for bait half the night. He needed all the sleep he could get. She wouldn't wake him until breakfast was ready.

The bunk under her dipped as the moored boat swung with the incoming tide. She loved the motion. She loved boats. Fate had been kind to them. Even before his lip had gone, Charlie had never been a Harry James on the trumpet. She

was no Dinah Shore. And blown-out trumpet players and third-rate vocalists were a dime a dozen in Florida. If it hadn't been for the *Sally*—well, Charlie would probably be tooting a liquorish stick with a non-union pick-up band in some piney-woods juke joint for five dollars a night and his drinks, and she would be entertaining the clientele with *She'll Be Coming 'Round The Mountain When She Comes*.

It would be pack and move on and worry about where their next meal would come from. This way they were at least secure. When the charter business was bad they could eat fish. And Charlie loved the work. If only she could buy him the kind of a boat he deserved to have. She could do it with five thousand dollars.

She lay there, making mental calculations. She got fifty dollars a week at the Beach Club, plus her tips. She hadn't spent a penny of either. Twelve times fifty was six hundred. Her tips, the last time she had counted the bills and silver she nightly stuffed into the elephant bank, came to three hundred and eighty dollars.

Six hundred and three hundred and eighty were nine hundred and eighty dollars. The season still had four weeks to go. That was two hundred dollars more, plus, say, another one hundred and twenty dollars in tips. That gave her a total of thirteen hundred dollars. Charlie had seven hundred dollars put by. They could sell the *Sally* for two thousand. And thirteen and seven and two thousand made four thousand dollars toward the boat. All they would need was one more thousand.

Maybe if she prayed real hard they would be able to raise it somehow.

She stretched luxuriantly on the bunk. It was time for her to get up and get busy in the small galley. But the bunk had never felt softer. The thin pad actually felt as if she were resting on an inner-spring mattress. She bounced lightly and

the resilient springs gave way under her.

She was on an inner-spring mattress. Her mind puzzled over that. There were no inner springs on the *Sally*.

Her hands felt her body. She had gone to bed in her slip, something she never did. The light blanket that covered her felt silken and unfamiliar. In open panic now she called:

"Charlie!"

There was no answer but the surge of the tide, the creak of the mooring ropes and the swish of the water in the bilge. She swung her feet to the deck. It was carpeted and unfamiliar. The distance between the two bunks was wider than she remembered it. Lurching forward she fumbled in the dark until she found the other bunk. It, too, had an inner-spring mattress.

HER BODY felt suddenly hot. The air coming in the dark ports was no longer cool. It was difficult for her to breathe. She wanted a light. She *had* to have a light.

She fumbled along the wall for the Coleman lantern that illuminated the *Sally*. It wasn't there. Then her groping fingers found a switch, and light pushed the grey murk of morning back out the highly polished brass portholes.

She wasn't in the cabin of the *Sally*. This one was mahogany paneled and seemed to stretch an endless distance to a mirrored door that must be the entrance to the head. She was wearing her slip and her stockings. Her evening dress lay folded neatly on a chair. Her evening slippers toed under the bunk. The other bunk was unoccupied and had not been slept in. An empty whiskey bottle rolled on the carpeted deck between the bunks. Over the bunk in which she had awakened, a built-in ashtray was filled with cigarette stubs, the ends of half of them smeared with lipstick.

She sat back on the bunk and tried to

think. She certainly wasn't drunk. She hadn't been drunk last night. She didn't drink. All the barmen and waiters at the club had orders to serve her gingerale, no matter what her host of the moment might order for her. The tips of her fingers pressed to her forehead, she tried to remember the night just past.

She had sung *Riders In The Sky* for her last number. She had loused up her phrasing as usual. If Louie, the piano man of the combo, hadn't pulled her back to the count she would have finished two bars ahead of the band. All the boys on the stand were pulling for her and Charlie. They knew how badly they needed a new boat. They wanted her to keep her job until they got one.

After she had finished her number, fat little Mr. Gaines, the building contractor from New York who always drank double bacardis, had asked her to have a drink. She had pointed at the clock, grateful that it was closing time. Up until two o'clock her soul belonged to the Beach Club. But after two o'clock her body belonged to Charlie.

It had been raining lightly when she left the club. She had stood under the marquee a moment kidding with Pat, the doorman, about whether it would be cheaper to walk and send her dress out to be cleaned and pressed or take a cab. She had decided on a cab when nice Mr. Camden who owned the big house on the bay and a forty-foot off-shore cruiser had driven out of the parking area. He had asked if she wanted a ride. She had said she could use one and he had driven her directly to the basin where the *Sally* was berthed without one off-color move or suggestion. Charlie hadn't returned from netting live bait against the morning charter trip. But when Mr. Camden had expressed interest in a possible charter trip with a man who really knew these waters, she had invited him onto the *Sally* and had made a pot of coffee while they waited

for Charlie to return with the live bait.

She had drunk a full cup of coffee and enjoyed it. So had Mr. Camden. He had even asked if he might have a second cup. She had poured a second cup for both of them. Then—*then what had happened?*

She began to cry. She certainly hadn't left the *Sally* of her own volition. The last thing she remembered was sitting in one of the swivel chairs in the open cockpit telling Mr. Camden about the boat she and Charlie hoped to buy.

Mary Lou wiped her eyes on the hem of her slip, then stared, incredulous, at the picture showing through the top of one of her sheer nylons. It was a greenish-black steel engraving of former United States President William McKinley. The criss-cross threads of the garter guard partially obscured the figure 500.

She fished it out with her fingers and found there were two of them. She had two five-hundred dollar bills in the top of her stocking. She stared at them, fascinated. Once she had seen a hundred-dollar bill, but she had never seen one for five hundred. She hadn't known they existed.

"Mr. Camden. Ahoy there. Mr. Camden."

Mary Lou started guiltily, thrust the bills back in her stocking and got to her feet. Someone was hailing Mr. Camden. This, then, was Mr. Camden's boat. She opened the door of the cabin and looked out.

Morning was grey in the sky. She could see the outline of a pier and beyond it the black silhouette of the Camden mansion rising stark out of its lush surroundings of graceful coconut palms.

A small man in a dressing gown and slippers was standing on the pier in the center of a pool of light flooding out of the pressure gasoline lantern he was carrying. He cleared his throat and coughed discreetly when he saw Mary Lou.

She crossed her hands modestly over her bosom. "And who are you?"

"I'm Phillips, Miss," he told her. "And I'm sorry to intrude. I wouldn't have hailed the cruiser had it not been lighted. But Mr. Camden's San Francisco office is on the phone. And I wonder if you would be so kind as to inform him they say that the call is urgent."

Mary Lou looked across the stretch of black water that separated the cruiser from the pier. The water looked somehow evil and sinister in the first red of dawn.

She was still confused. She was frightened. Her head had begun to ache. She wanted to get off the moored cruiser. She wanted desperately to find Charlie and tell him—*tell him what?* She began to cry again.

"Mr. Camden isn't here."

Phillips' tone was slightly incredulous. "Mr. Camden isn't on the cruiser?"

She shook her head. "No." Her voice was small. "No one is aboard it but me."

He held up the lantern to see her better. "Mr. Camden isn't on the cruiser? Then where is he?"

"I don't know," Mary Lou said.

CHAPTER TWO

Coroner's Bait

TWO HUNDRED YARDS up the beach there were music and laughter and dancing. There was a moon. There were stars. Boys were telling their girls they loved them. Girls were enacting pleased surprise when they had planned it that way all the time. Life was warm and normal and human.

Here there was nothing but cold suspicion, the bright light in the ceiling of the fish house where the coroner had insisted on holding the inquest, the ring of unfriendly faces, and the canvas-covered thing in the corner that once had

been a very alive Mr. Camden. . . .

Mary Lou sat, white and frightened, in a chair, her hair untidy where her nervous fingers had pulled at it, her mind battered by a day of questioning until she wondered if she still had a mind. Time and time again she had told the sheriff, the coroner, the trooper who had arrested her, that she didn't know how Mr. Camden had died, or how she had gotten aboard his cruiser.

But cold disbelief was on their faces. They looked at her blonde hair, her legs, her slim young body—and their eyes were hard and wise. They fingered the two five-hundred-dollar bills and arched their brows. She knew what they were thinking: She was just another girl singer in a band, a hostess working on commission in a club patronized by wealthy men whose middle-aged wives didn't understand them. . . .

Even Charlie didn't believe her. He stood, tall and dark and handsome, in a corner, still wearing his fishing clothes, his white captain's cap pushed back on the black curls she had fingered a thousand times, a cigarette drooping from thin lips that turned down at the corners, his eyes as wise and knowing as those of the other men.

That hurt most of all. Charlie thought she could be untrue to him. Charlie, who was her world. . . .

There was a click of high heels on the wooden wharf. A man and a woman entered. The woman was no longer young. She was made up too carefully. Her coiffure was too perfect. She was wearing a smart traveling suit and a platinum fox scarf that must have cost her three thousand dollars. Her thin nostrils pinched in distaste as she looked about her.

Coroner Gilmore hurried forward to met her. "Mrs. Camden?"

She ignored the hand he offered. "That is correct. I knew something like this would happen if I permitted John to come

to Florida alone." She looked down her thin nose at Mary Lou. "This is the girl who killed him?"

"Who is accused of killing him," Coroner Gilmore corrected.

The man with Mrs. Camden extended his hand. "You are the coroner, sir, I presume. Ferris is my name. Tom Ferris. I've been John's attorney for years. Sorry if we have delayed the inquest. We took the first possible plane out of New York after receiving Sheriff White's phone call."

Coroner Gilmore found seats for Mrs. Camden and Ferris. A tall, fatherly-looking man with a white mustache and kind blue eyes, Sheriff White leaned over Mary Lou's chair. He didn't know the little blonde night-club singer, but there were two sides to every question and he was willing to lean over backwards to see that she got a square deal.

Keeping his voice so low that only she could hear him, he said, "Look, Mary Lou. You know without me having to tell you that you're in a bad jam. Mrs. Camden is the type of woman who will spend a lot of money to avenge her husband. So why don't you tell the truth and make it easy on us all?"

She said, "I am telling the truth."

He shook his head. "Now you know better than that. Your husband needs a new boat. You wanted him to have one. But you were a thousand dollars shy. That's right, isn't it?"

She said it was.

White continued. "Camden had money. More than he knew what to do with. He tempted you aboard his cruiser with two five-hundred-dollar bills. But after he had given you the money you found you couldn't keep your part of the bargain. You couldn't cheapen your husband like that. You tried to get off the cruiser. Camden wouldn't let you go. You struggled with him." He nodded at the small-caliber revolver that Coroner Gilmore was laying on a plain deal table beside

the diamond ring that had been taken from the dead man's finger. "That gun was handy in the cabin. You snatched it up and shot him. Then you pushed him overboard, hoping the tide would carry his body out into the Gulf and you could get off the cruiser before anyone knew you'd been on it." He patted her shoulder. "You tell that story and there aren't twelve men in Palmetto County who will send you away for more than ten or fifteen years."

Ten or fifteen years. Ten or fifteen years away from Charlie. They might better send her to the electric chair.

The sheriff persisted. "That's about the way it happened, isn't it, Mary Lou?"

She shook her head. "No. I've told you the truth. I don't know how I got on his cruiser. I don't know where the five-hundred-dollar bills came from. Mr. Camden certainly didn't give them to me. He always treated me the way a gentleman should treat a lady. And the last thing I remember was drinking a cup of coffee with him in the cockpit of the *Sally*."

"Whenever you're ready, Sheriff," Gilmore said.

WHITE sighed and walked back to his chair. He had done the best he could for the girl. If she insisted on sticking to her fantastic story, there was no telling what a jury might do to her. It seemed a shame to snuff out the life of so pretty a young woman, no matter what she had done.

The inquest was very informal. Phillips, Camden's valet, and other members of his staff had already identified the body. Gilmore asked Mrs. Camden if she would be so kind as to make the identification absolute. Leaning heavily on her attorney's arm, she looked at the thing in the corner while two state troopers lifted the canvas. It wasn't nice to look at. It had been mid-morning before it was found. *

Her eyes hard, she nodded. "Yes.

That's John. The fool. The utter fool." She resumed her seat and sat looking at the ring on the table.

Coroner Gilmore called the two boys who had found the body. Both admitted guiltily they had been netting mullet out of season when they had come upon the body in the bayou. They had been tempted to "forget" about it, but their better instincts had prevailed and they had notified the state patrol.

A young state trooper was the next to testify. Informed there was a body in the bayou he had commandeered a boat and secured it. The body had subsequently been identified as that of a Mr. John Camden of 18432 Bay Boulevard.

"How?" Gilmore asked him.

"By papers I found in a wallet in the hip pocket of the deceased."

Mary Lou looked at the coroner's jury. Fishermen, merchants, beach housewives—she could see that their minds were already made up. They thought she had been with Mr. Camden. They thought she had killed him. They thought she had been untrue to Charlie. She looked at her husband. The cigarette still dangling from his lower lip, he was scowling at the floor of the fish house.

Coroner Gilmore continued. "Then what did you do, Officer?"

"After notifying the proper authorities, I received instructions to proceed to the home of the deceased."

"Will you tell us in your own words just what happened there?"

The trooper cleared his throat. "Well, I found Mr. Camden's valet in a very upset frame of mind. He said he had presumed that Mr. Camden was spending the night aboard his cruiser with a guest, but when he had hailed the boat early that morning the girl informed she didn't know where Mr. Camden was."

"Did he identify this guest?"

"Yes, sir. He said she was a pretty little blonde torch singer from the Beach

Club by the name of Mary Lou Ames."

"And you examined the boat at that time?"

"Yes, sir, I did. The cabin looked like—well, like someone had been throwing a party in it. There was an empty whiskey bottle on the floor. The ash trays were filled with lipstick-smeared cigarettes. Then, on making a more thorough examination, I found a small pool of clotted blood on the aft deck and a smear of blood on the rail." He looked at the revolver on the table. "I also found a .32-caliber revolver out of which two shots had been fired."

"You found this revolver where?"

"Hidden in the head."

"I see. And you were later instructed to arrest this Mary Lou Ames on suspicion of murder?"

"I was."

"And where did this arrest take place?"

"In Harry Ford's bar on the beach. She was sitting in one of the booths crying."

"And this woman is in court?"

"She is." The trooper pointed at Mary Lou. "That's her sitting there."

The coroner dismissed the trooper. Mary Lou worried at a hangnail with her teeth. It hadn't been at all the way it sounded. She had been crying because she had reached the boat basin after the *Sally* had pulled out and she hadn't been able to try to explain to Charlie where she had spent the night. As for sitting in a booth in Harry's bar, she spent most of her days in the booth. She had nowhere else to stay except the beach and the drugstore when the *Sally* was on a charter trip. The *Sally* was her home.

GILMORE called Charlie to the stand. "What time did you return to the *Sally* last night, Captain Ames?"

Charlie sat looking at Mary Lou. "Approximately three o'clock."

"You had been out netting for bait?"

"Yes, sir."

"Your wife was aboard when you returned?"

"No, sir."

"Did you see any evidence that she *had* been aboard the *Sally*? A freshly brewed pot of coffee or empty coffee cups, for example?"

The former trumpet player shook his head. "No, sir."

Charlie resumed his place against the wall.

He believed she had done it, Mary Lou told herself. Charlie believed that she had killed Mr. Camden. She forgot the hangnail and began to cry.

Gilmore turned to his jury and identified the revolver on the table as having belonged to the deceased. He established the fact that the dead man had been shot twice, and the county ballistics expert would testify that the two slugs taken from the body had been fired from the gun. More, a fingerprint expert would testify that he had found the fingerprints of one Mary Lou Ames on the gun with no other fingerprints superimposed on them.

Said Mary Lou Ames was in court. The jury was looking at her. He exhibited the two five-hundred-dollar bills. Shortly after her arrest, a police matron had found these bills on her person. He believed he knew how she had come by them. But it wasn't for the coroner's jury to sit in judgment on her morals. All they were called upon was to determine a presumption of her guilt or innocence in the death of the deceased.

The nightmare continued faster now. A teller from the First National Bank identified the two five-hundred-dollar bills by their serial numbers as bills he had paid to Mr. Camden on the day before. A doctor established the time of death as approximately four o'clock of the morning just past. A grizzled fishing guide testified as to the tides. In his opinion a body dropped into the pass near the Camden

pier at four o'clock in the morning would ride the out-going tide about as far as the bridge before the change in tides swept it back into the bayou. Pat, the doorman at the Beach Club, admitted unwillingly that the last time he had seen Mary Lou she had been getting into Mr. Camden's car. Then Gilmore called his chief witness.

"Your name is Irwin Phillips. You are—that is, you were Mr. Camden's valet?"

A dapper little man with a nervous smile, Phillips nodded. "That is correct, Mr. Coroner. I have been with Mr. Camden almost twenty years."

"And when did you last see your employer alive?"

"Last night. Rather, this morning, sir. I would say it was about fifteen minutes after two."

"And where was this?"

"On the private pier of his residence, sir."

"Was he alone?"

Phillips looked at Mrs. Camden, then looked down at his hands.

"Speak up," Gilmore said sharply. "I have no more desire than you have to add to Mrs. Camden's grief. But this is a coroner's inquest sitting on a murdered body. *Was your employer alone?*"

"No, sir. He was not. There was a young lady with him." Phillips pointed at Mary Lou. "That young lady there."

Mary Lou got to her feet. "That's a lie! You're lying!"

"Then how did you get aboard the cruiser?" Phillips retorted. "You must admit you were there this morning. I had to pull in the mooring lines to help you back up on the pier."

Burying her face in her hands, the girl sat down in her chair. Maybe she had gone mad, she thought. Maybe she was out of her mind. They said her fingerprints were on the gun. And she knew the bills were in the top of her stocking. Maybe she was on the pier. Maybe she did kill him.

Coroner Gilmore asked, "Did the

young lady seem to be under any physical compulsion? By that I mean was your employer forcing her to accompany him?"

"Oh, no, sir. They were both laughing and talking and seemed to be on the best of terms." The valet's lips pursed in distaste. "She was calling Mr. Camden 'sugar' and he was calling her 'little blonde armful.'"

Mrs. Camden got to her feet. "In the name of God, Mr. Coroner, how much more of this must I endure? Isn't it bad enough for me to have to sit here and look at the hussy who murdered my husband without having to listen to the intimate details of their conduct?"

"Please, Nell." Standing beside her, Attorney Ferris insisted she resume her seat. "Coroner Gilmore is obligated by law to bring out any facts that may be pertinent."

CORONER GILMORE turned back to Phillips. "You saw them board the cruiser?"

"I did, sir. It was snuggled up to the pier, but after they were aboard Mr. Camden played out the lines." He added, "So no one could disturb them, I presume."

"In other words, once aboard the cruiser it would have been difficult for anyone to have left it without going over the side and swimming for it."

"Yes, sir."

Spinning on one heel, Gilmore pointed a finger at Mary Lou. "Can you swim?"

"No, I can't," she admitted.

He turned back to Phillips. "How long did you stay on the pier after they had gone aboard?"

"Just a few minutes, sir. I stopped to listen to the young lady sing several songs."

"Oh, she was singing, eh?"

"Yes, sir. She sang *The Alphabet Song*, *It Only Happens When I Dance With You*, and *It's Magic*."

"Then what happened?"

"Then the lights aboard the cruiser went out and I went into the house and went to bed."

Her cheeks hot, Mary Lou stared at the floor. He said he had seen her board the cruiser. He said he had heard her calling Mr. Camden pet names. He said he had heard her singing. No one would believe her story now. She had never felt so alone.

"I see," Gilmore said. "And when did you next see Mrs. Ames?"

"Shortly after six o'clock this morning," Phillips said. "Mr. Camden's San Francisco office phoned on an important matter and seeing the cruiser was lighted I chanced Mr. Camden's displeasure by hailing it."

"But you didn't speak to Mr. Camden?"

Phillips shook his head. "No, sir. Only the young lady was aboard. And she said she didn't know where Mr. Camden was."

"And how did she act?"

"She was distraught, sir. She said she had to get off the cruiser and asked me to warp it back alongside the pier." He shrugged his thin shoulders. "So I did."

"I see," Gilmore repeated. "Now just one more question." He held up the revolver. "This has been identified as belonging to Mr. Camden. I wonder if you would tell the ladies and gentlemen of the jury where he kept it."

"He kept it aboard the cruiser, sir. In the drawer of a night table by one of the bunks."

"Thank you. That's all, Phillips."

Gilmore looked at Mary Lou. She could feel her insides shriveling. It wasn't any use for her to take the stand. She could read the lips around her. They were saying, "She killed him. Of course she killed him. . . ."

Who would believe her?

Coroner Gilmore cleared his throat. "Now if you'll take the stand, Mrs. Ames."

There was a stir of movement in the crowd. Mary Lou's eyes, suddenly blinded with tears, watched Charlie's broad back go out the door and into the night. Charlie was walking out on her. He didn't even want to hear her side of the story.

CHAPTER THREE

The Missing Cup

THE NIGHT WIND off the Gulf cool on his flushed face, Charlie Ames walked down the wooden pier of the fish house, then down the shore of the pass toward the basin where the *Sally* was berthed.

Mary Lou, his Mary Lou, was in a jam, a bad one. The right and wrong of the case didn't matter. Camden had dazzled her with his money. But whatever she had done, she had done for him. He couldn't let her down. She would need a lawyer, and a good one.

There was a light in the office of the Sheldon Ways. He stood a moment outside the door, sucking hard at his cigarette. Then he tossed it into the water and walked into the office.

Sheldon, a big man in his early sixties, looked up from his desk. "I'm sorry, Charlie," he said simply.

"Yes. So am I," Ames said. "But the kid is going to need a lawyer, Ben. And she's going to need a good one. How much will you give me for the *Sally*?"

The ship chandler was sorry for Ames. He liked Mary Lou. She had been a touch of vivid youth and color at the basin. But this was a matter of business. He shook his head. "Not a penny over fifteen hundred. And I doubt if I can resell it for that."

Ames opened his mouth to remind him he had offered two thousand dollars for the boat less than a week before, and changed his mind. It seemed to be human nature to kick a man when he was down.

Besides, it didn't matter. Nothing mattered but Mary Lou. "Okay. I'll take it."

The sale didn't include their personal possessions. It was in the bill of sale that he clear them off the boat. Perhaps Harry would let him store their clothes and cooking utensils in the back room of his bar.

He scowled as he leaped from the pier into the cockpit of the *Sally*. The coroner had made it sound bad about Mary Lou being arrested while sitting in the booth of a bar. He had made her sound like a tramp. She wasn't. But sometimes poor people didn't have much choice. They had to do what necessity dictated. And they hadn't been able to maintain both the *Sally* and a home ashore.

He laid a suitcase open on a bunk and began to pack their clothes. It was all his fault. He had let Mary Lou down. She had married a musician and wound up living with an unsuccessful charter fishing boat captain. No wonder Camden had been able to dazzle her with his two five-hundred-dollar bills. No girl of twenty-three, especially one as pretty as Mary Lou, wanted to spend all her life on a twenty-year-old fishing tub.

He laid the elephant bank on top of the clothes. He would deliver it with her clothes to Mary Lou at the jail. She could do what she wanted with it and the rest of her savings. Somehow he would manage to pay for her defense.

The cooking utensils presented a problem. He decided to pack them in a paper carton and began to clear out the small galley. They hadn't much. A few pots. A few pans. Two coffee pots. Four plates. Six cups and saucers.

He stopped suddenly in his packing and looked thoughtfully into the small cabinet. Then he unpacked the utensils he'd packed.

Four cups. Four saucers. One coffee pot was missing, and two cups and saucers.

He hadn't needed to wait for Mary

Lou's story. He knew the whole thing by heart already:

"We drove straight to the Sally from the Beach Club. Mr. Camden wanted to talk to Charlie about a charter. I made a pot of coffee. Mr. Camden said it was delicious and asked for a second cup. I poured us both a second cup—and that's all I remember until I woke up on the cruiser."

It was fantastic. Or was it? His eyes still thoughtful, Ames walked out into the open cockpit. Three hundred yards up the shore of the pass, light was streaming out of the fish houses. The pier was black with people. Car headlights were winking on on shore. The inquest was over. Sheriff White would be taking Mary Lou down to the county jail. They were through so soon.

And he hadn't even told her that he was standing by. He had been ashamed to in front of so many people. He had been hurt to think that she could do such a thing to him. He had allowed his stiff-necked masculine pride to come between

them. He had known he intended to stand by. She didn't. Right now she was crying, broken-hearted, in a blue-and-white police car, thinking she hadn't a friend in the world.

But what if she hadn't done anything to him. What if the fantastic story she had told was true?

"... and that's all I remember until I woke up on the cruiser."

He looked down at the black water lapping at the sides of the *Sally*. He could not think straight.

What if Mary Lou's story was true? What if someone had somehow doped the coffee and both she and Camden had been drugged?

That made a liar of the valet. But he could cover that point when he reached it. This was murder. A wealthy man was dead. There could be a million reasons why someone had wanted Camden out of the way. His widow, for example. The brittle woman hadn't loved her husband. All she had loved was his money and the position it gave her.



"There's a man who's going places in this company."

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THE BASIN where the *Sally* was berthed was unlighted. But Charlie had been expected any minute and the easiest way to dispose of a coffee pot and two cups one didn't have time to wash thoroughly would be to toss them over-side.

Hanging his cap on the wheel, Charlie slipped out of his shirt and trousers and lowered himself over the side of the boat. The water was cold with night, but the tide was slack and there was no pull to it. Here the water was two fathoms deep. He doubled his body into a knot and dived. His groping hands encountered bottom, nothing more. He broke water, filled his lungs with air, and dove again, this time farther from the boat.

There was little if any debris on the bottom. The basin was scoured by the tides. He dived a fourth, and then a fifth time. On his sixth dive his right hand encountered a small, hard object. He grasped it and kicked his way to the surface. There was no moon. The light from the stars was too dim for him to see the object clearly. Treading water he shook his hair from his eyes and felt the object with both hands. It was one of the missing cups. There was no use in him trying for the other cup or the coffee pot. That was a job for a diver. But here was proof of Mary Lou's story. She and Camden *had* been on the *Sally*. She had made coffee. *And someone had thrown both the pot and the cups they had used over the side of the boat.*

He swam back to the *Sally* holding the cup carefully in one hand. He would take it directly to Sheriff White and force him to re-open his investigation. If Sheriff White refused, he would beat the truth out of the dead man's valet himself.

Mary Lou hadn't been false to him. She hadn't even been foolish. The poor little kid had been framed. Ames was grinning as he pulled himself aboard the *Sally*. It all just went to show a man. If he hadn't

decided to stand by Mary Lou, if he hadn't sold the boat to raise funds for a lawyer, it might have been weeks or even months before he had noticed the cups and the second coffee pot were missing.

He towed vigorously, then slipped into his shirt and trousers and cocked his cap jauntily on his wet hair.

Honey, I was a fool to even doubt you for a minute, he would tell her. *It's you and me against the world.* To hell with what people thought. He knew. You couldn't bury the love of a girl like Mary Lou for ten times a thousand dollars.

He debated over the cup, then finally wrapped it in the towel on which he had dried himself. There were no lights on the fish house pier now. One by one the lights along the shore were winking out as the residents of the bait camps and the small cottages on the pass and the owners of the big houses on the bay called it a night. Only the Beach Club was still brightly lighted and would be for another hour. The black water lapping the sides of the *Sally* began to gurgle and spin in little whorls around the piling, gathering force and momentum as the tide changed and ran out.

Putting the towel-wrapped cup into the suitcase he intended taking to Mary Lou, Ames stepped up on the pier. He sensed the man before he saw or heard him. A darker blob of black against the night, the man stepped out from behind a piling.

"Who are you?" Ames demanded.

A blackjack cut through the night in a vicious arc for answer. Still clinging to the suitcases, Ames fell to his knees. Then the unknown struck him again. One star of all the millions in the sky grew brighter than all the rest. It grew in size and brilliance until it filled the sky. Then it exploded inside his head. . . .

HE WAS cold. He was tired. He would dive once more and then give it up as hopeless. It was, after all, a fantastic story.

It wasn't likely the cup would be on the bottom of the basin.

He dived down and down in his quest. Still, his hands were unable to find bottom. The pressure on his chest increased until he felt as if he were being crushed. He opened his eyes on a wet black wall of water. He wasn't diving. He was drowning.

Fighting both panic and the invisible force hurrying him along in the wet black void, he forced his body to the surface. *He had to breathe.*

One glance at the black silhouette looming still blacker against the night was enough to tell him he was in the center of the pass, not far from the bridge. He wasn't diving for the cup. He'd had it. Someone had knocked him out on the pier and rolled his body into the pass. More likely they had transported it in a row boat to the center of the pass. The tide wouldn't have pulled him out of the basin this fast.

He stood a moment treading water, gulping air, hoping whoever had hit him hadn't seen him break water. He was in no condition to fight. The left side of his head felt numb. It was an effort to even tread water. He could hear, or thought he could hear, the creak of muffled oar locks. Then the pull of the out-going tide swept him under the pier. He caught at one of the great concrete pilings and the accumulated barnacles tore his hands. A huge fish cut the water near him leaving a phosphorescent wake. He hoped it wasn't a shark.

Now he was out from under the pier, the tide hurrying him toward the distant line of white breakers and rip tides where the swirling waters of the narrow pass met the Gulf.

This was the way that Camden's body had been meant to go. Only Camden's body had been dropped two hours later, in slack tide.

He had only one chance. He took it.

Kicking off his sneakers, he began to swim with the tide but to the right oblique. If he could bring up on the Hook, he could wade ashore from there. Even at high tide, less than three feet of water washed over the bar.

He swam for what seemed like ages, not daring to stop to rest or float. Then one of his thrashing arms struck bottom. He was on the bar. He stood for a long five minutes, panting, fighting the pull of the tide. Then he waded ashore through the waist-deep water, looking from time to time at the sweep of the headlights as an occasional car crossed the distant bridge.

He didn't know who had struck him. He didn't care. That was for the sheriff to determine. Only one thing was clear. Mary Lou hadn't killed Camden. He had been killed by a man willing to kill a second time to cover up the first murder he had committed. The thing for him to do now was to contact the sheriff and tell him just what had happened. . . .

IT DIDN'T matter. Nothing mattered now. Charlie still loved her. He hadn't walked out on her. He had merely gone to sell the *Sally* to pay for her defense. He had thought enough of her story to search the bottom of the boat basin for the cups out of which she and Mr. Camden had drunk.

No longer sleepy or worried or frightened, Mary Lou rode in the back seat of the car, looking even more tiny than she was between two big uniformed troopers.

Driving, Sheriff White said, "You didn't get a look at his face?"

Ames shook his head. "No. I don't even know whether he was big or little. He came at me from the side and hit me before I could get a good look at him." He added, "But common sense tells me that Phillips the valet is involved. If Mary Lou's story is true, and my finding the cup overside and the assault on me proves

it is, then this Phillips *has* to be lying."

Sheriff White made no comment.

Morning was almost full. The bridge was already lined with early fishermen. All looked curiously at the police car. Sheriff White wheeled the car across the bridge, cut down the back lane and parked at the rim of Bill's Boat Basin.

Ames looked at the handcuffs encircling Mary Lou's slim wrists. "Does Mary Lou have to wear those?"

"Yes," White said flatly. "She does." He was far from satisfied with Ames' story. It was too pat, for one thing. The man naturally loved his wife. He didn't blame him. She was a little honey if there ever was one.

One of the troopers helped Mary Lou from the car. The two suitcases were on the pier where Ames had dropped them when he was attacked. He opened the one containing Mary Lou's clothes. The elephant bank was still there, but the towel-wrapped cup was gone. Kneeling beside the suitcase, he looked up. "Whoever slugged me took the cup. Maybe he was afraid a laboratory analysis would still show some trace of whatever drug he used."

Sheriff White's, "Maybe," was non-committal. He was, in a way, disappointed. He disliked prosecuting a woman. He certainly didn't intend to persecute her. But neither did he like to be dragged out of bed at five o'clock in the morning and lied to.

Stepping down into the open cockpit he examined the cabin of the *Sally* casually. There was no need of going over it. The lab boys from the state patrol had done that yesterday without having found a single thing that would substantiate Mary Lou's story that she and Camden had been there.

"There was a cup," Ames said. "I wrapped it in a towel and put it in this suitcase."

Sheriff White lighted a cigarette. He

was old. It was early. He was tired. "I doubt it," he said finally. "It was a good try, but it doesn't hold up, Ames. So two of the cups and a coffee pot are missing. So you dove and found one of them, the one you say you put into the suitcase. Supposing I did send a diver down to find the other cup and pot. What would that prove? Can you *prove* that you didn't throw them overside in an attempt to make your wife's story stand up? Can you *prove* that someone slugged you and dropped you into the pass?"

Ames got to his feet slowly. "No," he admitted. "I can't prove it. But . . ." He touched his head.

White shrugged. "You could have hit yourself with almost anything. Any man with a grain of gumption would do that much to save his wife from the chair."

Ames took a quick step toward the sheriff and one of the troopers caught his arm. "Nix. No rough stuff, Captain, or we'll have to put a pair of bracelets on you."

"No," Mary Lou begged. "Please. Charlie is telling the truth. So am I. We—"

The scream, carried by the brisk morning wind, was almost as loud as if they had been standing beside the woman on the Camden pier instead of over a quarter of a mile away.

"Help! Murder! Someone call the police!" The woman's voice screamed.

CHAPTER FOUR

Shoot to Kill!

IT WAS full morning now. The sun rising out of the mangrove swamp on the far side of the bayou painted the pier with light. Her hair in tight paper curlers, minus her makeup, her uncorseted body sagging under her expensive house coat, Mrs. Camden was no longer brittle looking. She was merely another badly fright-

ened middle-aged woman who looked as if she'd seen a ghost.

Mary Lou could almost feel sorry for her. All Mrs. Camden had was money.

Sheriff White hurried out on the pier with Ames close behind him. The troopers and Mary Lou followed. His eyes puffed and red as though he had spent the night drinking, Attorney Ferris came out of the house wrapping a robe around him.

"Who's dead now?" he wanted to know.

One of the troopers told him, "You know as much as we do, brother."

Out on the far end of the pier, Mrs. Camden began to weep hysterically. "He's dead. He's dead. He's dead," she chanted.

White shook her, harder than necessary. The beach had been a nice place to live until the tourists came down. Then it was one damn thing after another from the beginning of the season to the end. "Stop it. Make sense," he ordered. "Why

did you scream? Who's dead? Where?"

For answer she pointed a trembling finger at the water.

White looked where she was pointing and swore softly. Fouled in the line of an anchor buoy twenty feet off the pier, the lifeless body of Phillips, floating on its back, rose and fell with the marine plywood row boat with whose anchor rope it had become entangled.

"I couldn't sleep," she whimpered. "I came down to watch the sun rise. Instead I saw that. Oh, why does everything happen to me?"

The lawyer attempted to comfort her. "Now, now, Nell. You mustn't take on so." He attempted to pat her shoulder.

"Don't touch me," she screamed at him. "I hate you. I hate all men." Still sobbing, she walked swiftly back down the pier and up the path to the house.

White made no attempt to stop her. Instead, he looked at Ferris. "What do you

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know about this? You were here too."

The lawyer shook his head. "I'm sorry, but the answer is absolutely nothing. I was sleeping the sleep of the just, and of a man who took one too many, when Nell's screaming awoke me." He put the palms of his hands to his head as if to compress his headache. "If you think being a wealthy man's lawyer is a cinch just try it some time. John left his affairs in a mess. Nothing about them makes sense."

"I'll get the body," Ames offered.

The aging sheriff shook his head. "No. Don't bother. One of my boys can get it." He lighted a cigarette. "You wouldn't know anything about this, would you?"

His mouth suddenly dry, Ames asked, "Just what do you mean by that?"

Mary Lou came up to stand beside them and saw the body for the first time. "Why, it's that nasty valet," she gasped. "The one who lied about seeing me go aboard the cruiser with Mr. Camden."

"Yeah. That's what I mean," White said dryly. He ordered one of the troopers to get the body ashore.

Phillips hadn't been much in life. He was even less in death. The spark of life gone from his body, he was merely a lump of grey clay wearing a water-sodden tweed suit. White knelt beside it on the pier. When he got to his feet finally his face was grave and there was something in his hand.

"Damn you, Ames," he swore. "Do you take me for a complete fool? Why couldn't you let well enough alone? So you found a cup on the bottom of the basin, did you? So someone slugged you and dropped you into the pass. You weren't positive but you *thought* that it might have been Phillips." The sheriff snorted indignantly. "And I suppose after slugging you Phillips came back here and obligingly dove into the bayou."

His mouth suddenly dry, Ames said, "I don't know what you're talking about."

"I'll just bet you don't," White said.

He held out his hand toward Charlie.

Lying on his palm was a fishing knife of the clasp variety with a yellow bone handle. *Why that, Mary Lou thought, looks like Charlie's knife.* Then she saw it was. The letters C. Ames had been scratched into the bone with some sharp object.

THE LAWYER smoothed his hair. "I'll be damned. I get it now. In an attempt to shut the mouth of the one witness who saw his wife go aboard the cruiser with John, Ames killed Phillips, then cooked up some cock-and-bull story about Phillips assaulting *him*."

"That's about it," White nodded. "You fool. You utter fool, Charlie. As it was, I doubt if any twelve men in Florida would have sent Mary Lou away for more than ten or fifteen years. But this was planned and premeditated murder. Now I wouldn't be surprised if you both go to the chair."

A trooper took a step toward Ames. Instinctively Ames backed away. This thing was mad. He hadn't killed anyone, certainly not the valet. If he had killed him he wouldn't have left his knife in his chest. Nor would he have left the body lying in the shallows. He would have seen to it that it rode the out-going tide.

Whoever was back of this thing was clever. In attempting to clear Mary Lou, Ames had merely succeeded in enmeshing himself. How the dead man must be laughing at them all.

How the dead man must be laughing. The phrase rang through his head like a trumpet solo part.

Ferris said, "That's the trouble with murder. It breeds more murder." He looked at the dead man on the pier. "A shame. Phillips was such an innocuous little man, and so loyal to John."

Sheriff White nodded at one of the troopers. "You'd better put a pair of cuffs on him, Jim. And you call Coroner Gilmore, Tom. Tell him he's got another

fee out at the Camden place." He turned back to Ames, disgusted. "No wonder you offered to get the body. You wanted to get your hands on the knife that got away from you, eh? Where did you kill him, Charlie, here or on the *Sally*?"

Mary Lou attempted to step between the trooper with the handcuffs and her husband. "No. You mustn't," she pleaded. "All Charlie was doing was trying to help me."

"Think nothing of it, Sheriff," Ferris said. He snapped his fingers. "What's a little thing like a murder or two to a young buck in love?"

Ames backed away from the trooper with the handcuffs. He couldn't let them arrest him. There would be no one to clear Mary Lou if he did. And he knew now what had happened. It *must* have happened that way. He considered telling Sheriff White, but the older man would only laugh at him. He had no proof. The killer had no known motive. White would consider the truth merely another dodge, another attempt to wriggle out of murder. Still, if he allowed them to arrest him, he and Mary Lou would be tried and convicted of two murders they hadn't committed while the killer would go scot free.

The trooper was impatient. "C'mon. No nonsense now. Don't make me get tough with you. Hold out your wrists, Ames."

Ames smiled thinly. "To hell with you." He lashed out with his right fist. It caught the trooper on the point of the jaw and knocked him off the pier into the water. Then snatching the gun from the sheriff's holster before the older man could stop him, he said, "If you don't mind, I'll borrow this. And I'll also borrow your car."

Wide eyed with fear, Mary Lou cried, "No, Charlie. You—"

He stopped her protest with a kiss. "Keep your chin up, baby."

Then he was running down the pier,

Sheriff White's cries whipping his heels. "You fool! You damned fool! You won't get two miles!"

He was running that risk. Ames knew it. He might not get two miles. But unless he could find proof of what he knew, neither he nor Mary Lou had more than a mile to go, and that the short one that led to the little green door of the execution chamber in Raiford.

The trooper who had gone into the house to phone came out the door just as Ames slipped in back of the wheel of the police car.

"Shoot him," White bellowed. "Shoot him."

A bullet plowed through the rear window and grazed the windshield. Another thudded into metal. Then Ames was out of pistol range and speeding down the beach road at an insane ninety miles an hour.

A MILE down the sparsely traveled beach road he slowed his speed and turned right across the toll causeway leading into town. Then stepping on the gas again he whipped past the astonished toll taker with the siren of the car wailing. He would have to make time before he abandoned the car. And he couldn't stay in it long. By now the telephone wires and the two way radios would be humming: *Stop the sheriff's car. Shoot to kill if you have to. An armed killer is in it.*

On the far side of the causeway he turned off the siren and slackened his speed slightly. He was a mile from the center of town when he heard the first siren—coming the other way. He slowed to a normal speed and turned down a quiet residential street. It was a bright sunny Monday morning. Most of the housewives on the street were hanging out their wash. Most of the houses had attached garages. He drove into the first one he came to with the doors open and slipping out from behind the wheel

promptly closed the door. A woman bent over her wash at the far end of the garage gaped open-mouthed first at him, then at the lettering on the car.

Ames held a finger to his lips. "Shh. Police business," he told her. "Don't let anyone know that it's here."

He slipped out the side door of the garage leaving her still gaping at the car. The sheriff's revolver bothered him. He didn't know what to do with it. He finally solved the problem by thrusting it into his belt and allowing his shirt to hang on the outside. Two blocks from the house he hailed a cruising cab.

The driver wasn't much interested in his fare. He was more interested in the sirens wailing on all sides. Every police car in town seemed to be converging on the causeway and the beach. "Gee, something must have happened out at the beach," he said. "Maybe another killing, huh?"

"Yes. Maybe," Ames said dryly. He gave the address of the largest department store in town. The police would be looking for a man in dirty white pants, sneakers, a shirt, wearing a fishing boat captain's cap. He had been lucky so far. If his luck would only hold until he could buy a change of clothes he might be able to stay at liberty long enough to learn what he had to know.

He reached the store without incident. He left it twenty minutes later wearing expensive tan slacks, two-toned sport shoes, a wide-brimmed straw hat, and a flashing sport coat of the type he had worn when he tooted a horn for a living.

He had no illusions. The housewife would come out of her stupor and inform the police their car was in her garage. The police would talk to the cab driver. They would trace him to the store where alert clerks would remember the wild-looking man who had paid for his extensive purchases with wet money from a sodden wallet. But meanwhile he was free.

He also looked the part he intended to impersonate. Few people in town knew him. Those who did wouldn't recognize him in these clothes. He was merely another winter tourist, one of fifty thousand.

He found the address he wanted in a phone book in a drugstore, and walked over. The name on the door read:

RETAIL CREDIT ASSOCIATION

He opened the door and walked in. "You," he asked the girl at the reception desk, "are associated with the National Associated Credit Bureau?"

She assured him they were.

On the chance they might check on him, he gave the name of a former musician friend who had married a barrel of money. "My name is Lyle Masters," he lied, "of Asheville and Miami. I am planning a large real estate development on the beach, one that will run well into six figures."

The girl was properly impressed.

Ames continued, "And I would like a thorough credit and character report on three men who wish to invest money in my project. One of them is local. Two of them are from New York. Money is no object, but time is of the essence. I must have the report in an hour. Can such a thing be done?"

She excused herself to consult with the manager and returned to say that while it was highly irregular they would try their best to serve him—for a fee.

"Now if you will give me the names of the three men."

He wrote, "Ben Sheldon, local," on the paper that she gave him, "Thomas Ferris, Attorney At Law, New York City," added a third name, and handed her the paper.

She asked, "Do you wish to return? Or do you wish us to phone you when the reports are ready?"

He tapped his fingers lightly on the counter, listening to a police car siren

wailing down the street below the window. "If you don't mind, I'll wait right here," he decided.

Perspiration standing out on his forehead in pearl-like drops, he chose a chair in the corner of the waiting room and picked up a magazine. Maybe he was crazy. This thing he was doing was insane. Maybe he was merely prolonging the agony for both himself and Mary Lou. If anyone had told him last night when he had sold the *Sally* to Ben Sheldon for fifteen hundred dollars to pay for a lawyer for Mary Lou that he would spend a good-sized piece of it for a credit rating on a killer he would have laughed at them.

On the other hand, maybe he knew what he was doing. He was playing a long shot. But the long shot was the only hope that he and Mary Lou had.

CHAPTER FIVE

The Third Body

THE WAITING, the long hours of waiting, was hardest. All he could do was dream. Mexico City and a dark-eyed señorita. Rio de Janeiro. Cairo. Cannes. The world was wide. It was also his oyster. More, all of his troubles were over.

He would never have to worry about income, or keeping up a front again. True, there was one minor feminine fly in the ointment. But once the fly had served its purpose, it too could be disposed of as easy as pie.

The night wind cool on his cheeks the waiting man lifted his head and listened to a police siren wail its way down the beach road. Muted by the distance, the siren sounded like a disappointed hound baying after an elusive fox. That's what the police were—hounds. Stupid hounds moving in a circle chasing their own wagging tails.

If only they would capture Charlie Ames. If only he had made certain the youth was dead before dropping him into the pass. The young fishing boat captain was far from dumb. With his trained musician's ear he had detected the one false note in the score. He didn't know a thing and still he knew too much. And a little knowledge sometimes was a dangerous thing. The most important thing right at the moment, however, was to turn John Camden's few remaining assets into cash. The thought amused him and he laughed. The feminine fly could be defended on for that. The fool. She thought he loved her. . . .

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Bill Quinn, as Little Herman, the lovable, laughable East Side New Yorker in new mystery show, every Tuesday night on ABC.



Immaculate in a white linen suit, Ben Sheldon sucked hard at his cigar, then tossed it into a purple bougainville bush before ringing the door bell of the Camden mansion. Through the open screen door he could see Nell Camden moodily sipping a highball. Ferris sat staring at some papers. Both started as the bell rang.

The lawyer came to the door and switched on the overhead light. "Oh," he said. "It's you." He sounded disappointed. "I hoped that it was the police. I hoped they had caught young Ames."

Nell Camden wanted to know who it was.

"Mr. Sheldon, the ship chandler," he told her.

She called, "Well, tell him to come in. Don't keep him standing under that light. The mosquitoes will eat him alive."

Ferris opened the door. "Come in."

"Thank you," Sheldon said.

Inside the cool, high-ceilinged room, Nell Camden offered him a drink. "I don't mind if I do," he told her.

He drank, admiring her openly. Her fright of the morning was gone. Her body was slim in its corset. Every hair on her head was in place. If she was grieving for Camden, she was bearing her bereavement well.

Finished with his drink, Sheldon said without preamble, "I came about the boat. I hear you are giving up this place, so you'll want to sell it, of course."

Mrs. Camden said, "Of course."

Sheldon lighted a fresh cigar. "I'll give you three thousand dollars."

Ferris had returned to his papers. He looked up and hooted at the chandler. "You're crazy. That cruiser cost John close to fifteen thousand dollars."

Sheldon rolled his cigar on his tongue. "So what? The Taj Mahal cost a couple of million, maybe more. But I wouldn't give you a hundred for it. The big war money is gone. Forty-foot twin-engined

cruisers are a drug on the market. All I could do with it is convert it into a commercial fishing boat, or possibly sell it to some local lad who wants to run a charter fishing boat."

Her eyes narrowed to green slits, Nell Camden said, "Sell it to him. At his price."

Ferris got to his feet. His face was haggard. "This is the last straw, Nell. I've worked all night and all day trying to save you a few dollars out of the mess John's left of his estate. Can't you understand that his money has disappeared, that you are practically penniless?"

"That's why I want to sell the cruiser," she said. "Three thousand dollars is three thousand dollars. Besides, I'll never set foot on that boat again." Her well-kept fingers caught at her throat. "I couldn't breathe for thinking of him and that little blonde tart who killed him."

Sheldon seemed amused. "My offer still holds," he said.

She nodded. "And I accept it. Draw up the papers, Tom."

The lawyer ran his fingers through his thinning hair, found a bill of sale in his briefcase and began to fill it in.

Sheldon was interested in the room. "Quite a place you have here, Mrs. Camden. You ought to get a good price for it."

SHE POURED herself another drink. "Ought and will are two different matters. We've just found out it is mortgaged to the hilt, but Tom can't find out," her voice turned catty, "or doesn't care to find out what John did with the money." She got up and began to pace the floor. "With any of his money, for that matter. There is over a half-million dollars missing and nothing left to replace it but a lot of worthless stock." In sudden anger she swept all the papers off the desk on which the lawyer was working and pounded one fist on the wood. "Where is that money, Tom Ferris? Tell me. You were his fi-

nancial adviser. You knew all about it!"

Ferris got to his feet, one fist clenched as if about to strike her. Then, looking at Sheldon, he changed his mind. "I don't know," he said wearily. "I've told you that a thousand times. Please. Take it easy, Nell. You won't be exactly destitute. You have his ring. It's worth eighteen or twenty thousand dollars. You'll get that much or more above the mortgage on this place. Then there is his insurance."

She sniffed. "Insurance."

Sheldon rescued the bill of sale from the floor. "Mr. Camden carried a lot of insurance?"

Nell Camden shrugged. "A mere one hundred thousand dollars. And he had a fifty-thousand-dollar loan against that." She screamed at him, "I'm being cheated, I tell you. Someone got John's money."

The ship chandler backed away from her. "Look, lady. Please. It wasn't me. I didn't even know the guy except by sight. All I want to do is buy the boat." He laid the filled-in bill of sale on the desk and took a fat wallet from his pocket. "Now if you'll put your name on that, I'll give you your money and scam."

She signed her name with a flourish, then exchanged the bill of sale for the three thousand dollars that Sheldon counted out.

"Making the payoff legal, eh?"

The voice came from the open French windows leading out onto the lawn. A second later Charlie Ames opened and closed the screen door, then leaned against it. He was still wearing his newly purchased clothes. He had Sheriff White's gun in his hand.

Nell Camden screamed, "The killer! The fishing boat captain who killed Phillips!"

Ferris turned slightly green. He looked as if he wished he were somewhere else. "The cops are looking for you, Charlie," Sheldon said.

Ames shrugged. "The cops are always

looking for someone. You know, for whom the siren tolls. How about it, Ben? Feel like talking?"

The ship chandler shook his head. "You nuts or something, Charlie? Stop pointing that cannon at me. What have I got to talk about?"

"Murder," Ames said succinctly. "You know you were Mrs. Camden's lover. You know that for her sake, and the sake of Camden's money, you killed John Camden last night and pinned the blame on Mary Lou. Phillips was in on the plot. You killed him, too, and pinned his death on me because you knew that you couldn't trust him."

Sheldon drew himself up to his full six feet. His huge shoulders bulged the seams of his coat. "That's a lie."

Ferris looked from one man to the other, puzzled. There was something rankly theatrical about both of their state-



"The cops are looking for you, Charlie," Sheldon said.

ments. It was like watching a little theater group, and not a particularly good one.

Breathing hard, Nell Camden said, "He's crazy. One of you call the police."

"Fine," Ames said. "You do that. And we'll all go down to the station." He added coldly, "But before we do go to the station I'm going to advise the sheriff to search every room of this house for the half-million you claim is missing."

Ignoring the gun in Ames' hand, At-

torney Ferris picked up the phone. "Give me the police," he told the operator.

Nell Camden took the phone out of his hand. "No. You can't do that. He—he'll shoot you."

AMES put White's gun in the pocket of his coat. "I didn't say I would, did I? Go ahead. Call the police, Mr. Ferris. All I ask is that they search every room in this house before we go down to the station."

Ferris reached for the phone again.

"Hold it right there," a new voice ordered from the stairway leading to the second floor.

The lawyer looked at the man standing on the landing with an automatic in his hand, and the color drained slowly from his face. "John," he gasped finally. "You're dead."

"Dead and about to be buried," the man on the landing said dryly. "And with over a half-million dollars in cash on me, I really can't afford to be resurrected." He came down the stairs one step at a time. Nodding at Ames, he added, "Get the young gentleman's gun, Nell. I was afraid when he made his break this morning that he had smelled a rat. You other two gentlemen raise your hands."

Ferris put his palms on the desk instead. "John, explain this."

"The dead explain nothing," the resurrected dead man said. "I hate to do this to you, Tom, believe me. But in a very few minutes you can get all the explanation you need from the bum I dressed in my clothes last night, on whose finger I put my ring before I shot him."

Sheldon said, "I'll be damned. You ain't dead after all. I get the picture now. You were having financial trouble. So you got all the cash together you could, but instead of just disappearing you 'died' so your wife could collect your insurance. And to make it look good to the insurance company you 'murdered' yourself and pinned it on to Mary Lou."

Camden looked at him thoughtfully a moment, then at the black night outside the screens. "You know too much, all of you."

Sheriff White's gun in her hand, his wife asked, "What are we going to do?"

"I'll take care of that in a moment," he told her. He looked at Ames. "What made you smell a rat?"

Ames shook his head. "I couldn't put my finger on any one thing. But there was a sour note in the score somewhere. I knew that neither Mary Lou nor I were blowing it. And you and Mrs. Ames were the only other important two in the combo."

Her face ghastly under her rouge, Nell Camden said, "Then all that stuff about Mr. Sheldon being my lover . . .?"

Camden answered the question. "Was so much hogwash leading up to Ames' insistence that the police search the house. He knew we could not afford the least suspicion that the setup wasn't as it was supposed to be. He and Sheldon are probably in cahoots, trying to shake us down."

"I can always use money," Sheldon said.

Ames lighted a cigarette. "Then, too, I knew I'd been slugged and dropped into the pass even if Sheriff White did think that I was lying. And if I *had* killed Phillips I wouldn't have been so stupid as to leave my own knife in him. You killed him deliberately to get me out of your hair."

"That's right," Camden said quietly. "Phillips was loyal but a nuisance. He wanted to come with us." His smile was thin. "It was a good chance to kill two birds with one stone."

His fists clenched, Ames took a short step toward him. "You drugged Mary Lou on the *Sally*. You put something into that second cup of coffee."

"That's right," Camden admitted. "You see, I was in a bad financial mess,

an even worse one than my own lawyer knew. It was time for me to take the cash and let the credit for my death go where it would. And Mary Lou made a very pretty scapegoat. She has a beautiful body for a singer, hasn't she? I enjoyed tucking those two steel engravings of McKinley in her hose. I think it was a most artistic touch, don't you?"

He lifted his automatic as the younger man came a step still closer. "Whenever you want to die, Ames. But before you do, would you mind telling me this? How did you know I was in financial difficulties?"

"I spent a hundred bucks on a credit report on you," Ames told him. "And, brother, it was a lulu. I even learned the name of the red-haired chorus girl you're keeping in an apartment on Central Park West."

CAMDEN smiled at his wife. "He's lying, of course, my dear. There is no one in my life but you."

"There hadn't better be," she said. She repeated her previous question. "But what do we do now?"

"Kill them, of course," Camden told her. "Here's the story. Ames came back with Sheldon and forced you at the point of a gun to sign over the cruiser to Sheldon on a trumped-up bill of sale." He took White's gun from her. "Tom tried to protect you and they killed him with

this gun. But before he died he managed to snatch this automatic from the desk and fatally wound both of them. Can you remember that?"

"I can."

"Meanwhile I'll make myself scarce. I'll meet you—" He stopped, gaping open-mouthed at the front door.

"Where?" Sheriff White asked quietly.

A half-dozen troopers stood on the stoop behind him. And behind them was Mary Lou.

"You rich guys give me a pain," White added. "Hell, we picked Charlie up this morning fifteen minutes after he'd gotten that credit report and we schemed this all out between us. You couldn't have gone anywhere. I've had a dozen men watching this house since ten o'clock this morning. But to save the state a long trial we let you hang yourself. A police stenographer has been standing just outside a window taking down every word you've said."

"I see," Camden said quietly. "That was very clever."

Unable to control himself any longer, Sheldon demanded to know, "How was I?"

"You took your part off good," White assured him. He thumbed back the hammer of the big gun in his hand. "Now do you want to drop those two guns, Camden? Or do you want to shoot it out? It's immaterial to me. But I don't like to be made a chump of."

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The resurrected dead man hesitated, then, dropping the guns to the floor, he bolted toward the French windows, gambling that the sheriff wouldn't shoot at an unarmed man. He was right and he was wrong. White blasted a shot an inch over his head, then, following him out the window, bellowed, "He's heading for the pier. Shoot him, one of you guys."

A half-dozen shots shattered the silence of the night. At the far end of the pier, Camden attempted to brake his flight—and toppled into the water.

"I got him," a trooper yelled. "But the tide is carrying him out. One of you guys get a boat."

Safe in Charlie's arms, Mary Lou looked across the room at Nell Camden. The woman was gaping like a fish out of water. Then Mary Lou realized what was happening and felt sorry for her. The woman was trying to cry, and couldn't. There was no emotion in her. All she had was money. And now she didn't even have that.

The little singer snuggled closer to her husband. "You loved me. You believed me all the time, didn't you, Charlie? You even sold the *Sally* so you could pay for my defense."

"Yeah. Sure," Ames said absently. His arms tightened around her instinctively, but his eyes were on the scene on the pier. Camden had sunk like a stone and the boys couldn't find his body. The chances were they wouldn't find it. The tide was going out and if the body didn't lodge against a piling of the bridge or wash up on the Hook it might not be found for days. It might never be found, for that matter.

Mary Lou smiled at Sheldon. "You're a good actor, Ben. As good as any movie actor I ever saw."

The big man grinned, self-conscious. "Gee, thanks, Mary Lou."

Ames was still watching the search for

Camden. Mary Lou continued to smile at Sheldon. "That—er—sale of the cruiser was legal, wasn't it, Ben? It's yours now, isn't it?"

"Why, yes. I guess it was," he admitted. "Sure it was."

Mary Lou made a mental calculation. She still had the nine hundred and eighty dollars she had saved. Plus the seven hundred that Charlie had in the bank, plus the twelve hundred he had left from the sale of the *Sally* made \$2,880. And surely they could borrow one hundred and twenty dollars somewhere. Ben might even take their note.

She turned on even more charm. "Why don't you sell it to us, Ben? It's too big a boat for you. And we'll be *glad* to take it off your hands and give you two thousand eight hundred and eighty dollars cash and our note for one hundred and twenty dollars."

The big ship chandler sighed. He was being swindled by an expert. He knew it. The cruiser was worth a cool ten thousand. Still, the kids had something coming for the hell they'd been through. A forty-foot cruiser would give Mary Lou a real home. She could stay out from underfoot even on all-male charter trips. It was too big a boat for one man. He grinned at the thought. It was big enough for a young couple like Mary Lou and Charlie to raise a family on. They probably would, too.

"Okay, it's a deal," he said slowly and ruefully.

Ames felt Mary Lou stir in his arms and turned and kissed her hair. She was such a helpless little thing. She had been through so much. He would have to take better care of her from now on. He held her still closer to him. "Love me, little sweetheart?"

She stood on her tiptoes and kissed him. "Even when you smell from fish," she assured him.

LEAVE IT TO THE LITTLE MEN!



"They came into the tavern, hit Al over the head and killed him," she said.

By
PHILIP WECK

*God help the men who tried to court lovely Marie Jackson. . . .
For the Little Men guarded her well, and the patter of bare, invisible
feet was the last sound those would-be lovers ever heard. . . .*

THE MORNING after Bartender Al Romano was killed, it was raining, hard. I didn't have to travel more than twenty feet in it—from my house to the car, from the car into the headquarters building—but my hat was soaked and the water was running from my raincoat every step I took up to the eighth floor.

I shook the water from my hat-brim and went into the office. My shoulder bothered me, as it always does in rainy weather, and my gallstones were kicking up. It wouldn't take much to make me angry that morning.

Jud Lookabaugh was sitting on the window sill, his feet up on my chair, two puddles of water forming there on the

rubber seat cushion from his wet shoes.

"Get your dirty feet off my chair!" I yelled.

Jud looked at me, surprised, and took his feet off slowly and crossed his legs.

"What's eatin' you today, Sonny?"

If there was one man I didn't like, it was Jud Lookabaugh. I didn't like his face and I didn't like his attitude. I didn't like his blabby mouth and his imitation Errol Flynn mustache and his leering winks and his big-time connections. I just didn't like anything about him.

And that morning when my chilblains were bad and my stomach was worse and I saw the two puddles of water on my chair, I would gladly have throttled him.

Instead I grabbed a towel and wiped at the cushion.

"Some day," I said, "I'm going to get that rubber hose out of the vault and work out on you."

Jud said, "Relax, Sonny. Relax. What's new?"

I sat down. "Not a thing as far as you're concerned."

"For once you're right." Jud uncrossed his legs and got up. "I been through your reports and there isn't one that's any good."

He walked to the door and said, "Gimme a ring if anything comes up, Fatso. Don't forget."

Then he went out—just in time. Another two seconds and I'd have smashed his teeth in.

Which was something I shouldn't have done.

For Judson T. Lookabaugh was an important man. According to Jud Lookabaugh, that is.

He was, for example, the Power of the Press. He also was the Great Lover, an unassailable and irresistible authority on women. For that matter, he was an authority on anything and everything, particularly on how to operate the Police

Department, including the Homicide Bureau, better than any stupid flatfoot such as me.

In my book he was a cheap, vindictive little police reporter, a wolf and a blabbermouth, and the brother-in-law of the Police Commissioner.

That's where I was stuck. I've got no objection to tossing police reporters out of my office, even good ones. But brothers-in-law of the Commissioner? Not me, brother. I like eating.

Some day, though . . .

I SAT there cursing him for five minutes. Then I dipped into the reports he'd been reading, illegally, before I showed up.

I didn't find much.

A man we'd been after for ten years had been picked up in Los Angeles. The Dillard case was ready for the prosecutor's office. The West Grove bank-holdup job was stymied. I just glanced at those.

The next report, though, was a new one. I read it through.

Date: May 7, 1949.

Investigating Officers: Theo. Brzynski and Jos. Murphy.

Subject: Homicide. Call received 11:16 P.M. from Seventh District. Bartender Timely Inn, 1146 East 66th, 123e

P.M. from Seventh District. Bartender Timely Inn, 1146 East 66th named Alfred Romano, found dead on floor of tavern. Preliminary opinion of coroner's physician: skull fracture on back of head from blunt instrument.

Remarks: Investigating.

Signed: Theo. Brzynski, Joseph Murphy.

The report from the Seventh District was attached and I read it, too. A woman had phoned that station at 11:02 P.M. and told the sergeant that the bartender at the Timely Inn was dead. She didn't give her name. A couple of radio-car boys had found the tavern unlocked, the man stretched out at the end of the bar, no one else in the place. The cash register had contained \$117.62; apparently none

of the stock had been taken. It didn't look like a robbery.

I pushed both reports aside. Brzynski and Murphy were pretty good men. It was nothing for me to get excited about. I stared out the window at the rain for a while; then I called the prosecutor's office about the Dillard case.

A little after ten Ted Brzynski called in.

"We made a pinch in that tavern killing," he said. "The waitress in the joint. Want to talk to her?"

I said, "Do you want me to?"

"Maybe you'd better." He sounded worried. "She's downstairs now; we'll bring her right in."

About five minutes later the door opened and it was Jud Lookabaugh again. There are only three people who walk into my office without knocking: the Commissioner, the Chief and Jud Lookabaugh.

I said, "You can get out of here right now."

But he didn't. He parked himself on the window sill instead and said, "You can't hold out on me, Sonny. You shouldn't even try."

I didn't know what he was talking about but I said again, on general principles, "Get out."

"Nuts." Jud took a pen-knife from his pocket and whittled at his fingernails. "Wait till you get a load of the dish that's

coming in here. What is this, the Vice Squad or the Homicide Bureau?"

I said, "Get out, before—"

But I was too late. A knock sounded on the door and Ted Brzynski stuck his head in. He glowered at Jud and said, "Okay, Boss?"

"All right, all right!" I told him. "Bring her in."

They brought her in, and right away I could see what Jud Lookabaugh had meant.

She was quite a girl.

Her skirt was medium length but on her it looked short. Her dress was loose fitting; for my own comfort I was glad it wasn't tight. From her ankles to her neck, her lines were long and limber and slinky.

In the dim light of a bar, this kid would be taken for—well, for a waitress in a joint, which she was. But when you got a close-up of her face, you wanted to send her back to school.

She looked like a country kid, just arrived in the big city. Her nose was freckled, honest looking; her eyes were a clear, innocent blue; she didn't have a wrinkle. She couldn't have been more than twenty, and she was scared. Scared stiff.

Ted Brzynski said, "Sit down, Marie. Sit down. The lieutenant here wants to ask you a few questions. Just routine, that's all."

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SHE sat down next to my desk and she did not cross her legs. Ted and Joe Murphy took chairs opposite and Jud Lookabaugh stayed perched on the window sill, still hacking away at his fingernails.

I said, "What's your name, young lady?" That's generally a good place to begin.

"Marie. Marie Jackson."

"Address?"

She gave it to me. 6392 Dorchester. Not the worst address in the city and not the best, either. A rooming house, probably.

"All right," I said. "Suppose you tell me about it."

She swallowed a couple of times and then she said, "I told these men already."

"You have to tell me again."

I thought she was going to cry but she didn't. She said, "It was horrible! Just horrible! Al was so nasty after the customers left, and then they came in and—"

I said, "Wait a minute, wait a minute. Start from the beginning. How long have you worked in this joint?"

She had to think that one over. Two months, she said finally. She'd come from a little coal-mining town in Southern Illinois to get a job in the city. And the only job she could find was in the tavern.

"At first it was all right," she said. "Except for Al. Al was always trying to get fresh. He was the night bartender, you know. The one who was—who was killed."

I said, "Yeah."

"But there was always some customers around. Until last night. Last night business was bad and the last customer left about ten o'clock and—"

"And what?"

"I couldn't keep him away," she said. "I tried to, but I couldn't. Finally I ran back into the storeroom and closed the door, and he—"

On the window sill Jud Lookabaugh

was whistling one of those tuneless whistles, just blowing the breath out of his puckered lips. The girl looked at him and he winked.

I said to the girl, "Go on."

"He locked the door," she said, "and he told me he wouldn't let me out until—until I decided to be agreeable. He was horrible!"

"So what did you do?"

"I just waited there. And after a while I heard kind of a scuffle near the bar and I waited a little longer and I didn't even hear Al moving around so I peeked out and—"

I didn't crack. I said, "And what?"

"I saw him lying there. I knew he was dead, so I called the police. Then I went back to my room."

Jud Lookabaugh's whistle was getting louder and more irritating.

I said, "Is that all, Miss Jackson?"

"Yes," she said, her voice low. "That's all."

I sat there for a minute, drumming on my desk, trying to look as if I believed her. Finally Ted Brzynski said, "Here's something you ought to see, Boss."

It was a rundown from the Bureau of Identification on this Al Romano, the dead boy. He'd done a couple of sixty day stretches for A and B—assault and battery. He was a pretty rough character; that part of her story could be true.

So I said, "Look, Miss Jackson, why don't you tell the truth? Nobody's going to do anything to you. Even if you did hit him it was self-defense and you won't even be brought to trial."

Her eyes got bigger and rounder and she said, "But I *am* telling the truth."

I said, "Let's go over it a little. You ran away from Al into the storeroom. Right?"

"Yes."

"And he locked you in?"

"Yes."

"Did you have a key?"

She said, "No, of course not. Al had the only key."

"Then how did you get out of the storeroom?"

SHE didn't get flustered, as if she'd made a mistake, and she didn't stammer. She just said, "Why, they unlocked the door, I guess."

"They? Who are they?"

"The men who killed him" she said simply.

I could see the big grin on Jud Lookabaugh's face, but I didn't pay any attention to it.

Instead I said, "So now we have a couple of men—"

"It was more than two," she said. "It was five or six."

"All right, five or six men. They came into the tavern, hit Al over the head and killed him, unlocked the storeroom without even knowing you were in it, then left. They didn't clout the cash register or do another blessed thing. That doesn't sound very logical, does it?"

She said, "No, it doesn't," and her voice was just a whisper.

"Why don't you tell me everything, then?"

She wouldn't look at me. She stared at the top of the desk and then at the floor and she traced little circles on the desk with her finger. Finally she whispered, "I did tell you the truth, except—"

"Except what?"

"I just didn't tell you who they were."

That was one I hadn't expected. I looked at Brzynski and Murphy; their faces were blank and innocent. I looked at the girl, and she kept her gaze down, waiting.

So I said, "All right, who were they?"

"The little men," she said.

She said it in a flat, dull voice, so low I could barely catch the words. I said, "What?" because I wasn't sure.

She repeated it. "The little men."

I could hear the rain spattering against the window, and I could hear Jud Lookabaugh's tuneless whistle. Outside the office, Sergeant Jensen's typewriter was clattering away and the elevator door in the corridor opened and then closed.

She looked up at me then and the flicker of hope that had been in her eyes before was gone. "I knew you wouldn't believe me! I knew you wouldn't understand! It was the little men!"

I said, "What little men? Who are they?"

"The little men who help me, that's who they are."

"What do they look like?" I was talking a little fast, trying to keep my temper.

"I don't know," she said. "I've never seen them. But whenever I need help they come."

"If you don't see them, how do you know?"

She said, "Sometimes I can hear them pattering around in their bare feet."

That was what did it. Little men pattering around in their bare feet, helping this barmaid out of her troubles.

I got up out of my chair. I said, "Miss Jackson, is that all you have to say?"

She didn't answer me; she stared at the floor instead.

"Okay, boys," I said to Brzynski and Murphy.

They got up and she got up. "Can I go home now?" she asked.

I almost told her to wait for the little men to bail her out. But for some reason I didn't. Instead I said, "Not just now. Not until later".

Brzynski took her away.

"Lieutenant," Murphy said when the door had closed behind the two.

"Yeah?"

"About the little men," he said.

"What about them?"

"My mother used to tell me about them, Lieutenant. Only it wasn't the little men, it was the wee folk."

I said, "Murph, for the love of heaven—"

"Yes, sir," he said.

"Get Dr. Riordan to talk to her this afternoon."

"Yes, sir," he said. Then, "Lieutenant—"

I was getting mad. "Now what?"

"She said this isn't the first time the little men saved her. She said they did it twice this year."

"I don't care if it was six times!" I said. "Forget it!"

"Yes, sir," said Murphy. "I just thought you'd want to—"

That was when I got what he was driving at. I said, "Okay, Murph, tell me about it."

THE FIRST TIME, he said, had been about six months ago, in her home town of West Frankfort, Illinois, when she was walking home alone late at night. A man had jumped out at her. She ran and he ran after her. Then she heard the patter of the little men's feet and she looked back and the fellow who'd been chasing her was stretched out on the ground. The next day she read in the paper that he was dead.

The second time had been on the train to Chicago when some drunk tried to corner her in the club car. She'd been a little vague about that one, Murphy said, but the man disappeared while the train was speeding through Paxton, Illinois, and she'd heard the little men again.

"Murph," I said, "maybe we have a triple killer on our hands. What do you think?"

He said, "Maybe. But, Lieutenant, I keep thinking of my mother telling me about the wee folk."

That was the trouble with Murphy. A good cop can't be soft-hearted. I said, "Forget it. And call Riordan."

"Yes, sir," Murphy said, and he went out.

I sat down at my desk again and I was just about to punch the bell to call Sergeant Jenson in when Jud Lookabaugh got off the window sill. I'd forgotten about him.

"Wow!" he said. "What a dame!"

Here it goes, I thought. All over the newspapers.

But this time I wasn't dealing with Judson Lookabaugh, the demon reporter. It was Judson Lookabaugh, the great lover.

"Did you see her give me the eye, Sonny?" he asked. "Did you see her?"

I said, "No, I didn't."

But he didn't hear me. "What a babe!" he said. "What a number! You going to release her?"

"Sure. Soon as I find those little men," I said.

He walked over to the door. "When you do, let me know. I want that home address. Did you see her give me the come-on?"

Then he went out, too.

Characters, I thought. Characters—all of them. And I didn't mean just the people we arrested.

I called Jenson in and sent a wire to the sheriff of Ford County, at Paxton, and the chief of police at West Frankfort. Then I fiddled around with the other reports on my desk and finished reading all of them.

By then it was time for lunch. The rain had let up some but not enough so I decided to duck into the tavern half a block down for a sandwich and a bottle of beer.

I got in the second elevator. The operator was a stranger to me, a little fellow who didn't come up to my shoulders.

"Where's Bill?" I asked him.

"He's sick, Lieutenant," the little guy said.

I don't eat in the tavern often and I didn't know the bartender. But some-

how I'd never noticed how short he was until that day.

I ordered my sandwich and beer. About half a dozen men were in the place, at the bar and in the booths.

Not a one of 'em was over five feet five.

I finished about half my sandwich and left. I walked two blocks in the rain just to get a look at O'Brien, the six-foot-six traffic cop on duty at Twelfth and Wabash.

Back in the headquarters building, I let the second elevator go up empty and waited for the next one. But it didn't do any good. The little operator must have changed cars.

"Howdy, Lieutenant," he said.

I didn't answer him.

In my office I kicked the West Grove bank holdup around some more, trying to think it out before the FBI did, until I got to wondering how tall the stickup men had been. The witnesses had said average. But a gun in his hand, pointed at you, will make an average man look tall and a little man look average.

I put that report away.

About two o'clock Dr. Riordan called.

"That's some girl, Lieutenant," he said.

"Some girl. Now if I were younger and single again—"

I said, "Yeah, sure. But tell me—is she bugs?"

"She's as sane as you are," Riordan

said. "You don't need to worry about that."

"What about the little men?" I asked him. "Didn't she tell you about them?"

"Of course. Of course she did. It's perfectly normal."

"Normal?"

"Lieutenant," the doctor said, "don't you ever dream about a chicken farm somewhere?"

"I hate chickens and I hate farms. I'm going to open a restaurant when I retire."

"Well, there you are. It's the same thing with this little girl, Lieutenant. The very same thing. She's perfectly normal."

Brother, these psychiatrists . . .

I HUNG up and drew doodles on some scratch paper. The rain finally had stopped. About three o'clock a wire came in from West Frankfort.

NO RECORD SUCH CASE, the wire read. ONLY VIOLENT DEATH AROUND TIME YOU MENTION WAS OBVIOUSLY AUTOMOBILE HIT-RUN.

Well, I thought, maybe it was a hit-run. Maybe this unknown driver of the unknown car hadn't seen the man run across the street. Especially if the driver was kind of short.

I put the wire aside and waited for an answer from Paxton.

It came pretty soon, collect.



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You're welcome, sheriff.

I tried to get interested in the Dillard case. But it wouldn't work. So I put in a call for Brzynski and Murphy. They were both out and the call went in to the radio dispatcher.

Brzynski phoned in fifteen minutes later.

"What's up, Lieutenant?" he asked.

"Not a thing," I said. "Anything new on that dame and the bartender?"

Ted said slowly, "Well, nothing positive. We've been canvassing the neighborhood of the tavern and we found a couple who were parked right across the street from ten o'clock on, until the district squads showed up."

"What do they say?"

"Nobody came out of that tavern, Lieutenant, except the girl. Not another soul."

I said, "Good! Good! That just about ties it."

"I guess so," Brzynski said. "But there's one thing."

"Yeah?"

"Those little men, Lieutenant. You wouldn't be able to see them anyway; they're invisible."

"That did it. 'Look here!' I yelled. 'What's the matter with you? You been talking to Murphy's mother?'"

He said, "No. There's an old Polish legend, Lieutenant, about five coal miners who were buried in a cave-in and—"

"Forget it!" I said and hung up.

I went over and stared out the window. From the eleventh floor, looking down, everybody is pretty small.

Finally I picked up the phone and called the coroner's office.

I got Bill Lyons, a deputy, on the other end.

"About that bartender, Al Romano," I said. "Don't you have an autopsy yet?"

Bill said, "Oh, I imagine so. Wait till I look it up."

He was back in a few minutes. "Why, sure we have, Lieutenant. It's coming to you through regular channels."

"Forget the regular channels. What does it say?"

Bill said, "What's the heat? Something gone wrong?"

"Forget the heat," I said. "What does the report say?"

"I've got it right here," Bill said. "Hmm. No contusions. No lacerations. Slight caudal fracture, post mortem. Cause of death, coronary thrombosis."

I almost dropped the phone. "Coronary thrombosis!"

"Yeah, that's right. Heart failure, Lieutenant. His kicker went back on him and he fell down and bumped his noggin somewhere but he was dead when he did it."

"Wait a minute!" I said. "Wait a minute! That skull fracture didn't kill him?"

"No, of course not. No bleeding at all there, Lieutenant. It didn't even break the skin and it probably wouldn't have been fatal. It was a perfectly natural death."

I hung up again. I put on my raincoat and hat and went downstairs and got a police car and a driver and went out to that tavern.

But I couldn't tell much there. I stood in front of the storeroom door as if I were going to unlock it, and looked around for a spot my head might strike if I fell over.

IT WAS there, all right. The end of the brass rail, and sure enough it had a slight dent in it that looked fresh.

So we unsealed the tavern and I phoned headquarters to release the girl. I thought

about how lucky that girl had been. Not one, but three times.

That's what made it look bad. Three times. In my business you don't like coincidences.

I thought I had her figured, though. She'd go back to her own room that night, probably, and she'd stay in the big city. So we stopped at the Seventh District and I told them to make a spot check on her, starting in the morning, and to wait for the next development. We found that we were licked on this one, anyway.

Then we went back in. I was tired by the time I reached my office, tired and hungry, and my shoulder was aching again. Sure enough, Jud Lookabaugh was in the office.

He'd been pawing through the reports on my desk and apparently he'd found what he wanted because he was scribbling down an address.

He winked at me. He was half lit. "So you tried to hold out on me," he said. "You can't do that, Sonny. You can't hold out on Jud Lookabaugh."

"Get out!" I said.

He picked up the telephone and dialed a number.

"Hello," he said. "Hello." Then, "Nancy, that you? Listen, hon, I can't make it again tonight. I'll be a li'l late. Now, don't get sore, hon; it's a hot one." He winked at me over the phone. "It's sure a hot one, hon. I got to follow it up."

He hung up and went out.

There wasn't anything I could do about it. The girl was old enough to take care of herself; Jud wasn't committing any crime. So I just let him go.

I stuffed the reports in a desk drawer and went out for dinner, all the way up to Gus' where the waiters are big men. I had a steak with green noodles and a couple of bottles of beer. Then I went

out and sat in my car and waited, with the radio on.

I got a signal about half-past nine. A Code 62—dead body found—from Sixty-Fourth and Blackstone.

It took me a half-hour to reach the spot and then I found Blackstone blocked off with a new pavement just poured in. Fresh concrete. I got out and walked up the block, keeping my eyes on that wet concrete, studying it.

The body was gone by that time, of course. So I went around the corner to the Seventh District station.

"What about that Sixty-Two you just had?" I asked the sergeant on duty.

He flipped through his reports. "An aneurism, the doc called it," he said. "Sort of a blood clot on the brain. And you know who it was, Lieutenant? Jud Lookabaugh, the reporter."

"No!" I said, trying to sound surprised. "Sergeant, leave a note for your captain, will you? Tell him to call off that spot check I asked for."

I went out then and found a public telephone where I wouldn't be overheard and called up Pete Miller, the ward engineer for that district.

It was pretty late; I got him out of bed.

"You're repaving Blackstone south of Sixty-Third?" I asked him.

"Yeah, that's right," he said. "We couldn't pour it until this afternoon account of the rain."

I said, "Well, do me a favor, Pete. Get some men out there tonight if you can to smooth over that concrete, will you?"

"Sure," he said. "What's the matter with it?"

"It looks like a bunch of kids ran through it in their bare feet," I told him.

"Yeah, sure," he said. "Kids. You never know what they'll pull next, do you?"

I said, "No, you sure don't."



EACH NIGHT HE DIED ...

By FREDRIC BROWN

Each night Dana killed. . . . And each night he himself died again. . . .

IN THE CORRIDOR the new guard, the red-headed one, didn't like the sound of muffled sobbing; he didn't think he was going to like his new job. You had to be tough, like Joe, who was on duty with him tonight. Joe jerked a thumb; he said, "That's Kiessling. Killed his brother. You read about the trial?"

"Yeah," said the redhead. "What time is it?"

"Three," Joe said. "Two more hours."

In the cell Dana Kiessling lay rigid on the cot, face down to bury his face in the small pillow that would not quite stifle the sounds he made. He was ashamed of those sounds; he wanted to be brave. Why couldn't he? He'd made such a horrible mess of his life; why couldn't he find the courage to be calm for the last few hours?

He was a coward and now, beyond all doubt, he knew it. But knowing it didn't help to fight it. Would he completely break

up, he wondered, at the last minute tomorrow morning? Would they have to drag him off, screaming like a madman, hold him down and strap him into the chair from which he'd never get up alive?

That was a horrible picture, but not so horrible as the picture of himself, actually strapped down in that contrivance of horror, the black hood over his head, and then the jerking of his body as the current came.

He wanted to scream at the very thought of it. And within hours now, it wouldn't be a thought; it would be fact, searing fact. The current going through him, jerking him, convulsing him. He thought of the frog's leg in chemistry lab, the instructor poking two wires, the sudden jerk of the leg. The frog had been dead; it had felt nothing, yet it had jerked. But he would be alive when the current came.

Would he be alive after? That would be the horror of horrors. He knew, from having read the descriptions of other executions, that sometimes a second, even a third or fourth application of current was necessary. The first didn't always kill.

Electricity wasn't predictable; you read of linemen on high-voltage transmission lines who had taken frightful shocks, shocks that had charred parts of their bodies black, and yet had lived.

He might live, too. But if he did, there would be a second paroxysm of pain, of charring, of fire through his guts, through every fiber of him. And if that failed, a third. *Ad infinitum*, until they pronounced him dead, until the life that was in him, the life that was *he*, was gone from his body.

And after pain, the eternal night of death. He was afraid of that, too; he didn't want to die. He was afraid to die.

THE FEAR of that never-ending *nothingness* gripped him so hard that he bit the pillow between his teeth to keep from crying out. He'd always been afraid

of dying. The fear had been with him as a child, as soon as he knew what death was. He'd dreamed about it. And the fear had diminished only slightly when he grew up. Now it was back with all the vividness it had had when he had been ten years old and the death of a friend with whom he had played every day after school had suddenly bludgeoned his mind with the fact of its own mortality. Grief for the loss of his friend had been a mere bagatelle compared with the awfulness of the thought: This can happen to *me*.

He had sobbed all night that night, as he sobbed tonight; he had fought off panic then as he tried to fight it off now, and with as little success. But then, that night, his parents had heard and had come to console him and to help. True, they had thought that grief for his friend had been the cause; they had mistaken fear for grief. Yet his mother had sat on the edge of his bed and held his hand, and it had helped him not to be alone. As he was utterly alone, utterly alone, on this most fearful of all nights. For one who has every night feared that death *might* come, is not the ultimate horror to *know* that it *will* come, at dawn?

He bit the pillow and found it wet and soggy. He rolled over to his back, but kept the back of his hand to his mouth to keep from screaming.

Execution was unbelievably cruel, he thought. Why couldn't the law be as merciful to a murderer as the murderer had been to his victim. George hadn't suffered; he hadn't even known he was going to die. Much as he'd hated George, he'd done him that kindness; he'd struck suddenly and unexpectedly, mercifully. There had not been even a second, not a fraction of a second, of fear or anticipation.

Only after George was dead, beyond fear or pain, had he run the car over him, fixed everything to look so perfectly like a hit-run accident. And he had planned so

carefully, driving the stolen car, wearing gloves, being sure nothing could be traced back to him, nothing, once he had safely got rid of the car and gone home in his own.

What ghastly luck it had been to get caught in a minor auto accident, a mere affair of crumpled fenders, only two miles from the scene of the murder and while he was still in the stolen car. It had not even been his own fault—or possibly slightly so, for he had, of course, been nervous. But it had been mostly the fault of the other driver, trying to pass him on a hill, then swerving as the truck came in sight at the top of the rise. Still, he might have avoided the accident had his judgment been better, had he stepped on the brake to let the passing car cut in ahead of him instead of stepping on the accelerator to pull ahead and let it fall in behind until the truck was past. The other driver had done as he did, stepped on the accelerator first and then, to avoid the head-on collision with the truck, had swerved into him, crumpling his right front fender against his left back one and then locking bumpers and dragging both cars to a stop.

Not his fault at all, although better judgment might have avoided it. And then the state patrol car coming along so quickly, and the state patrolman asking to see his driver's license after he'd given a phony name. . . .

HE TRIED desperately to keep his mind on that night, awful as it had been, instead of on tomorrow morning. He tried to concentrate on the trial—parts of it vivid in his mind as though it were this afternoon, other parts blurred. He tried desperately to think of the past, *anything*, however unpleasant, in the recent or distant past, to keep his mind away from the horribly near future, the future within a few hours.

Even the murder he had committed.

Was he sorry that he had done murder? Yes, *yes!* And yet he did not know, if he was honest, whether it was genuine repentance or whether it was regret because of the consequences that had been and the consequence that was to come, the consequence, the chair, the electric chair, the searing, sizzling . . .

He wrenched his mind back to George. Why did they, people, make such a horrible thing of killing one's own brother? Why did they think it worse than killing a stranger? When he, George, was so utterly different that he wasn't a brother at all? A despicable, smug little tyrant, always lecturing, always finding fault, quibbling over little sums of money owed him, narrow, opinionated, spiteful, hateful.

Above all, or below all, stingy. With a successful career, his own house, twenty or thirty thousand dollars in the bank, hadn't George refused—point-blank, almost insultingly—to lend him, Dana, the paltry five hundred dollars he needed to square off the mess of debts he'd gotten into, through no real fault of his own, and get back on his feet to take a new lease on life? It had been such a ghastly mess, hounded on all sides, tormented, persecuted. . . .

It would have been a temptation to kill George just for that thoughtless cruelty, that selfishness, particularly for telling him that it was "for his own good; it would do him more harm than benefit to lend him money until he learned to order and organize his life." His own brother, and his *younger* brother, talking like that. A little prig if there ever was one, a self-righteous little snob who never bet on a horse race in his life, who watched how much he drank, who steered clear of women just because he was afraid of them.

And that, of course, made him just the type of guy who'd be caught by one sooner or later. He, Dana, knew women and knew how to handle them; that was why, in his early thirties, he was still a bachelor. May-

be he'd liked them too well, maybe that was partly why he'd never made very much of himself, but at least it had kept him from getting caught in the shackles of matrimony. When you like them *all*, no one of them catches you.

But poor simple George! Getting richer and more successful all the time, and still only in his late twenties—it was only a matter of time till a woman grabbed him off.

And then—well, he wouldn't get even any petty loans from George, the ten bucks or the twenty bucks that would tide him over till pay day when he'd had a bad break some time during the week and had gone flat. And, God, how he'd hated to ask George for those little sums that had meant nothing at all to a man who was earning ten to fifteen thousand a year and was so goody-goody that he didn't know how to spend it, except on, of all things, a house of his own—and what did a bachelor want with a *house*?—that had cost twenty thousand dollars, and a fine car, and a servant to keep up the house, and paintings. The little cluck actually liked paintings, and a painting had killed him.

He'd had the guts, the very night he'd turned down Dana's request for a five-hundred-dollar loan, to show Dana a painting he'd paid four hundred dollars for. A French modern that looked like vegetable soup to Dana. And he'd gone on talking about art and the finer things in life when

he, Dana, was two months behind in the rent on his apartment.

It was tough to get by on five thousand a year; hadn't he done damned well to keep his debts and troubles down to the point where only five hundred would square him off and give him a new start? And then to be shown a painting, and *what* a painting, that his kid brother, his smug, dumb kid brother who wouldn't lend him money to get out of a temporary jam, had paid four hundred dollars for. Of all things, a painting. Not even an etching; he himself had etchings in his apartment; it was a nice gag to have etchings, but he hadn't paid a fourth of four hundred dollars for all his etchings put together—and a few hunting prints besides.

YES, it had been that very evening that he'd decided to kill George. He knew that George had never made a will; and, since their parents were dead and there were no other close relatives, he knew that he was George's only heir. Say, thirty thousand in the bank, a house worth twenty thousand with ten thousand dollars' worth of stuff crammed into it, a car—even with inheritance taxes and funeral expenses off, there was going to be a lot of hay left over. Maybe fifty thousand. Anyway, forty thousand. Eight years' income in one grand chunk. What couldn't he do with *that*?

This situation calls for

WILDROOT CREAM OIL




NON-ALCOHOLIC
Contains
LANOLIN



EASY TO USE
NO WASTE
OR SPILLING
HANDY FOR
TRAVELING

Yes, that night he'd decided to kill George. He'd taken a full month to work out every little detail, because there wasn't going to be the slightest slip, not a thing to make the police even suspect that George's death wasn't an accident. Oh, he'd worked it out fine.

And everything had gone perfectly until that damned fool had tried to pass him on the hill. . . .

And now, tomorrow—today! How long now? One hour, two hours, three hours? Surely at least one hour. There'd be breakfast, the breakfast at which he'd be given anything he wanted—as though he'd be able to eat! As though a single bite of anything wouldn't nauseate him! And the chaplain to give him comfort—as though that could help. And the prison barber to shave the round patch on top of his head and to shave the hair off his leg where the other electrode would go. And the guards staring curiously at him through the bars.

The electrodes through which the searing current . . . He heard himself screaming, and got the back of his hand over his mouth again, and that didn't stop the sound so again he buried his face in the pillow and found the screams turning into racking sobs.

A coward, sure. But why shouldn't he be a coward if he was a coward? The men you read about who walk calmly to the chair or to the hangman's platform, weren't they merely lacking in imagination? A cow feels no fear when it is led to the slaughtering pen, for it does not know what is coming. Those men who walk calmly are like that—they know what is coming, but only as an abstraction; they cannot imagine it.

Wouldn't any sensitive man, with imagination, feel as he did? Those guards outside—he could hear a faint murmur of their voices now and again—would they be any braver than he?

How long? Three hours—two? Not long, at any rate.

And then the corridor, the walk (would he walk of his own accord?), the room, the chair. The hot squat, the prisoners called it. One had said to him, "Pal, you're going to fry."

To fry. Literally to fry, jerking spasmodically against the straps, the blood boiling in his very veins; the searing, charring, agonizing pain . . .

The jerking leg of the dead frog in the chemistry lab . . .

The pillow was between his teeth again, but he was screaming despite it. Then, out of breath, he stopped, and the silence was even more terrifying than his screams had been.

Death. Pal, you're going to fry. And if the current doesn't kill you the first time, they give you another jolt, lightning striking twice in the same place, and a third time, your body jerking horribly . . .

He screamed again.

IN THE CORRIDOR the red-headed guard, the new one, said, "Gee, Joe, that gives me the willies." He thought, Joe, the hard one, grinned. He said, *I'm not going to like this job. I'm not going to like it at all.*

"You'll get used to it. He does that every night and all night. Six years ago he beat the rap—by going screaming mad because he was afraid of the chair. Before they even tried him. Only he thinks he's tried and sentenced and every night's the night before."

The redhead shuddered; he said, "Six years. That's . . ."

Joe had already figured it; he said, "About two thousand two hundred nights so far, and every one of them the night before he burns. Sure, he beat the rap."

The redhead didn't say anything, but he decided he wasn't going to like working in a nuthouse.

Macabre Museum

Mayan & Jakobsson



Following constant quarrels with one of his fellow town officials—County Supervisor Gus Krubaech—Constable Bartlett of Blue Lake, Michigan, was sufficiently incensed to send an infernal machine to Krubaech's daughter's wedding and blow them all to bits.

The sender's name on the package was that of one of Krubaech's relatives. When officials went to the address given, it was discovered that their man had moved, and that every other department carried a record of the new address except Constable Bartlett's. His crime perfect, Bartlett was convicted solely on his clerical sloppiness as law officer!



A case that has been open in the Siamese criminal annals for 300 years, has finally been marked closed. Citizens were vanishing without a trace, so that a man no longer dared leave his sons or his wives unprotected for an hour.

Recently, authorities, with long-denied access to court records, were able to solve the mystery. The royal physician of King Thiri-thudamma the First had prescribed an elixir for his majesty's health, and with the aid of the secret police, the following ingredients were actually obtained and compounded:

2000 hearts of white doves
4000 hearts of white cows
6000 hearts of yellow-skinned human beings!

Who stole the body of Nichol Brown? they asked in Edinburgh for two generations, but everyone guessed the answer. The devil himself. And this dour old master Nichol Brown defied. One night in his cups, Brown swore to slice a chop from the leg of a recently hanged corpse, roast it, and eat it; and this he did.

But not with impunity. Instead of beating his wife as usual, he held her down in the hearthfire, and by the time neighbors broke the door in, Mrs. Brown was dying from burns. Six weeks later, Nichol hanged himself. But not for long—the corpse disappeared in a day. It was never seen again.



What is perhaps history's grimmest mail robbery occurred before there was parcel post. The Duke de Sancy had offered his largest diamond to the crown of France and sent it by trusted courier.

The courier arrived soon after his master, but unfortunately was waylaid by footpads in Paris. Search of his person revealed no trace of the jewel, yet the Duke was confident of the trustworthiness of his messenger—and the king was anxious for his gem. Nor was this trust misplaced. A few flicks of the dagger revealed the diamond safe and sound in the faithful messenger's stomach.





DEAD ANGEL

By
JOHANAS L. BOUMA

Thrilling Novelette of a Fear-Haunted Girl

The ugly blue marks of the strangler's fingers were still on her throat, and her slim body was a cold, dead weight in Pete's arms. But he'd never be lonely—as long as she would keep on talking to him. . . .

CHAPTER ONE

Girl of Fear

THE MINUTE I hit Frisco I grabbed a room and ducked around the corner of this joint off Market Street for a drink. I needed one after pushing the falling crew at an Oregon logging camp for three months, and I was having my second when I noticed

her. Funny I hadn't seen her before.

One look and I knew she didn't belong. You understand, this was Skid Row with the foam on top, a dinky little

"It won't be long now, kid," I told her. "Just a little while longer."



bar without the grill. It was stand up or fall on your face, one foot hooked around a brass rail that hadn't been polished since before Prohibition. Yellow, fly-specked light bounced back from the painted window with the nude in the center. Smoke thick as fog and the sweet, sickly smell of dead beer and whiskey breath. A barkeep with a grey, fleshy face and a dirty apron. And the knowledge that ten thousand drunks had reeled at his bar. That kind of place.

I stole another look at her and thought I saw an angel. She was small in a fur coat. Her hair was long and blonde, her eyes blue-green, like beyond the surf on a sunny day, her face pale, a startling pale with shadows beneath the cheekbones. A delicate face. The face of an angel.

But she wasn't an angel.

She was stiff. She swayed like a pine in a heavy blow. She hung on for a second, a funny, scared grin on her face. Then she let go and buckled in the middle.

I caught her just before her face met the spittoon.

"What the hell!" the barkeep said.

"It happens," I said, "especially when they keep guys like you around to feed 'em the stuff."

She was out cold. I picked her up and sat her in one of the booths. You know the feeling it gives you to hold a baby? Well, that was part of it when I held her in my arms. The rest of it I didn't quite understand yet, but I could feel it working around inside me. I went back to the bar. The barkeep had his fat hand over her purse. He had a tough look about him, as if he wasn't going to stand for any nonsense.

"Gimme," I said.

"You her guardian?" he said. "You her keeper?"

"In this flop house I am," I said. "Hand it over."

He didn't hand it over. You can expect it in this kind of a place. They live in the

dark. They wait like vultures for the liquor to take hold, then they go to work. It never changes, no matter what town or what city. They even look alike, and they've all got the same answers. This time I couldn't take it. Not with the kid out like a light and nobody to watch over her. What she was doing here in the first place I didn't know, but she didn't belong, she was out of the swim, not one of the ordinary tramps that work the bars.

I reached over, fast, and grabbed hold of his throat. I jerked and bellied him up against the bar. His hands fumbled under the bar.

"Gimme," I said.

HE CAME up with a short billy. It caught me above the left ear and the lights stuttered. I squeezed my face together and hit him with everything I had. He got away from me and I went over the bar after him. I heeled him on the way down and he went flat. Bottles fell, smashed with dull plops, made the air bitter-sweet. He got hold of a jagged neck. He held it in front of him like a shiv and rushed me. I clubbed him behind the ear; the jagged glass ripped my coat sleeve and cut flesh. But he was my baby, his face right down there in front of me. I brought up my knee, hard. It sounded like smashing a melon. He sat down and he didn't get up.

"Gimme," I said. "For the last time I'm asking you to give me her purse."

He swayed to his feet. His nose was flat with his face and would never look the same. On him it didn't matter. He reached for the purse and laid it in my hand.

"Thanks," I said.

I walked around the bar to the booth. She was sitting up, staring at nothing, that funny look still on her face. It gave me the feeling that she didn't give one damn what happened to her.

"You're getting out of here," I said.

I took hold of her shoulders and pulled her upright. She fell against me and held on, and that feeling hit me again. In a small voice she said, "Where we going?"

"You're going home," I said.

She jerked away. The fear was suddenly livid on her face. "No—not there!"

I looked at her. She wasn't much over twenty. There was no ring on her left hand, but that didn't mean anything. Part of me kept wondering why I bothered about her at all. I still couldn't make it out. I had never seen her before, but that first look had touched me. She was like a song that you think you've forgotten. And then you hear it again and it slugs you in the heart and melts you inside. Not only that, but listen: You fight for a girl and something happens. She becomes part of you.

Somebody said once that no matter where or what place you leave, part of you remains behind. Maybe there had been too many places for me, too many towns, too many girls that were forgotten the next morning. Any other girl, all right. Not this one. Whatever I had left behind of myself came back to me. I took hold of her arm.

"This is no place for you," I said. "Come. We'll take a walk. It'll clear your head."

"I've been here before," she said in a

tight little voice. "I can find my way home." She looked at me as if she didn't see me. "I don't want to go home. I'm afraid."

"All right. But you can't stay here."

We were almost to the door when the barkeep came out of the back room. He was wiping his face with a towel. When he saw we were leaving, he started shouting about the police.

"Wipe it clean," I growled. "Go ahead, call the cops. They might be interested in how you peddle booze to minors, then paw their belongings."

He swore, but he didn't move to the wall phone.

OUTSIDE, it was night. Street lights burned holes through heavy fog. After three blocks she was no longer leaning against me. We walked up a long hill. Frame apartment houses lined both sides of the street. We crossed over at the next corner. There was a graveled path leading into a park. From there you could see the city and the harbor. The fog had lifted in spots and you could see the lights of the cars going across the winding Bay Bridge. And you could see the lights on the Rock in the bay.

In a strangled voice the girl said, "I'm going to be sick." She leaned over the railing and let go. Off to the left there was a lamppost. I moved over there and opened the purse. There was a roll of

Shocking Facts about PIN-WORMS



You may think that Pin-Worm infection is rare and strikes only "careless" families—that, therefore, your children are safe.

Don't you believe it! Medical experts report that at least one out of every three persons examined, adults and children alike, was a victim of Pin-Worms. And this embarrassing, annoying condition can spread through entire families.

There's no need to take chances with this ugly pest. A medically approved, scientific treatment now destroys Pin-Worms easily and effectively. This remedy

is Jayne's P-W Vermifuge developed by the famous Jayne Co., specialists in worm remedies for over 100 years.

So watch for the warning signs, especially the tormenting rectal itch. Then ask your druggist for P-W, the small, easy-to-take tablets that act in a special way to bring real relief from Pin-Worms.

**Just Remember:
P-W® for Pin-Worms**



bills I didn't bother to count. There was an identification billfold that told me her name was Dora Blake; the address was on Knob Hill. When I got back she was still sick and breathing heavily.

"Come along now," I said. "We'll get a cab and take you home."

She leaned on me going down the path. She was half asleep. After a while the roof lights of a cab cruised up the street. I waved it down. "All right," I told the girl, "here's your ride home."

She didn't answer. She was pressing softly against me, her head on my shoulder, her eyes closed. She looked like a child in sleep.

The driver had the door open. "Where to, Mac?"

I got her inside and then I knew I couldn't leave her like that. I climbed in after her and gave the driver the address. "Take your time going there."

He looked at the girl and grinned. "I get you, Mac."

I rolled down the window and put my arm around her. We sat there like that while the cab prowled the streets. . . .

It was a two-story white stucco with a Colonial front. The driveway made a U going up to the porch. I moved the girl gently as the cab came to a stop. She opened her eyes uncertainly. In that moment all the fear was out of her. Then she caught sight of the house. It was as if the fear had been lurking, waiting for this moment to pounce again. It flashed across her face and she drew back against my arm. Then she straightened, as if steeling herself. She looked at me. "Thank you," she said huskily. "I . . . don't . . ." She put her fingers to her temples. "Everything . . . isn't quite clear, but I know you helped me."

"Forget it."

I helped her out. In the drive at the side of the house I could see the blue gleam of a convertible. "Can you make it all right?"

"Thank you, I'm fine now."

The door opened behind us and a sharp voice said, "Dora! Where in the devil—"

I swung around and he stopped. He was big, wide through the shoulders, with a lean, tanned face, dark hair and scowling eyes. He wore double-breasted blue that had never seen the inside of a factory. "What goes on here?" he growled.

I turned back to the cab. Her purse was on the seat. I turned and handed it to her. Tanned Face came down the steps and said, "Who are you?"

"Never mind," I said. Now that I had her home I wanted to get away. I knew what I was up against with this one. Listen, there's no time limit on that, no law that says you have to know a woman so long before it happens. It was happening to me and I needed to be alone with it, to think it out.

I was climbing into the cab when Tanned Face grabbed my arm, the cut arm. I came around and hacked at his wrist and he let go.

"Bob!" the girl said sharply. "Don't! This man took care of me."

He moved around so he could get a good look at me. I could see the cab driver big-eyeing us.

This Bob said, "Where did you pick her up?"

To hell with him, I thought. "What's the kid to you?"

"Oh, please . . ." the girl said. There was no feeling in her voice now. She looked at me. "Bob and I—we're sort of engaged."

I looked straight at him. "Then he ought to be horse-whipped for letting you out of his sight."

I didn't think he had it in him and I wasn't set. He caught me alongside the face and slammed me back against the cab. I ducked the next one and hooked one low enough so that he doubled. I had the right back to give it to him when a sharp voice said, "Stop it!"

A tall woman stepped between us. Without turning, she said, "Go inside, Dora." Then she looked at me, her dark eyes flashing. "Suppose you explain yourself."

I looked at her. She wore a white, clinging gown, strapless. Her skin had a dusky look. She had handsome, strong features, full lips and smoldering eyes. They flickered the slightest bit when I said, "Like hell I'll explain myself."

"Don't be impertinent," she said.

I shrugged and turned to the cab. I had the door open but she placed her hand against it and looked up at me. "I'm sorry. But this is rather unusual, and I feel I owe you an explanation—about my sister."

"Why? You never saw me before. Listen, I don't want no explanations. Just take better care of the kid."

"But you've gone to an awful lot of bother. The cab—"

"You don't owe me a thing."

The kid came back out on the porch. From the look on her face I knew she had been taking it all in. "He's hurt, Edith. I remember now—there was a fight." She was looking at me with wistful eyes. "Won't you please come in and let us fix your arm?"

It wasn't only her voice asking me, but her eyes. I turned to the driver. "Wait here."

"I'll drive you home," the woman in white said quickly. "It's the least we can do."

I pulled out my wallet and gave the driver a five-spot. He grinned and said, "Thanks, Mac," and drove away.

CHAPTER TWO

Rendezvous—With the Dead

THE WOMAN in white led me through plush rooms, up carpeted stairs into a tile bathroom with a tub the shape of a

clover and the size of the old swimming hole. I took off my coat and shirt and sat on a spindle-legged stool, looking at her fooling inside the medicine cabinet. I didn't mind that a bit.

The cut was above the elbow, but it didn't amount to anything. She washed it with alcohol and took her time bandaging it. Then she straightened. "I'll get my coat."

I put on the shirt and the coat and went out into the hall. A door opened and the kid put her head out. "I . . . want to thank you for helping me."

"That's all right."

"What's your name?"

"Pete Moffitt."

"Will I ever see you again, Pete?"

There it was, and the same thought had been floating around in my mind. Working in the woods you don't give much thought to seeing the same one twice, not in earnest, anyway. You drift from one job to the next, never thinking past the next time you'll hit town to blow off steam. Maybe that was why, at thirty, I had never married. I was balanced now, but I wasn't kidding myself about which way I had to fall. This one was out of my league. This one, with Knob Hill for her back yard, represented something that was beyond me. I could reach forever and not attain it. I was afraid to look ahead, afraid to dig out that feeling she gave me and examine it. I shook my head, smiling a little. "It's not likely."

"I wasn't afraid with you."

"There's nothing to be afraid of."

The terror came back, stringing the words out. "Oh, but there is! You don't know them. You—"

Steps came down the hall. She threw me one last look of appeal and closed the door softly. Edith came up, frowning. A short black coat hung from her shoulders. "What has the child been telling you?"

"She's scared of something. Wouldn't be you, would it?"

"Do I look frightening?"

"You look something else."

She smiled. "Where is your place?"

I told her.

She said "Oh," and moved ahead of me down the stairs.

Tanned Face was nowhere in sight. We went out the front door and she told me to wait. The blue convertible was gone. After a while a Cadillac coupe backed out of the drive. It stopped, started up again and came to a halt in front of me. I climbed in.

"You haven't told me your name."

I told her.

"What do you do, Pete? What kind of work?"

I told her that.

"Must be a nice clean life out in the woods."

"Yeah," I said. "What's wrong with the kid? Kind of young to be hitting the booze."

"Well, father—her father, we're half sisters—died a couple of weeks ago. She took it pretty hard."

"Why doesn't that guy she's engaged to look after her?"

"Bob Yonkers? He's our lawyer. He came to the house to see her, but she'd sneaked off."

"You talk like she's an inmate."

The woman laughed. "Not quite. She's very upset and nervous. You mustn't mind her."

"I didn't mind her one little bit."

She gave me a quick over-the-nose glance. We were rolling down Market, near Fifth, where I'd rented the room. She turned that way and parked about a half-block from the hotel. The street light was up ahead and only a little of it came through the windshield. She looked at me. I could hear her breathing.

"I loved it the way you looked at me on the porch," she whispered.

"That's fine," I said. "But I want to get back to my hotel. Now."

THE NEXT DAY, around three, the phone shrieked. I climbed off the protesting bed, knowing it was the kid. I'd had her in the back of my head all this time, and that damn phone ringing put me back where I was, in that ratty room. I'd lived in a hundred places just like it, but she was making me see it for the first time. The phone yelled again. It was the kid, all right, and she was downstairs.

"Hold it," I told her. "I'll be right down."

I put on a leather jacket, ran fingers through my hair and looked at the cracked mirror. I needed a shave. What the hell. Maybe it would fix her good to see me like this. I went downstairs.

"Hello, Pete."

I said hello and asked her how she knew where I lived.

"I heard you telling Edith."

I led her over to a sagging couch at the rear of the lobby. She had on a dark suit. Her hair glittered like spun gold. I scowled at the clerk who was giving her the eye, and grabbed her arm and steered her to the park, three blocks away.

"What's on your mind, kid?" I said.

"Please, Pete. I had to talk to you."

"Well, if it helps you to talk, I guess it's all right."

"About my father . . ." She hesitated, working her fingers in her lap. Her face got all twisted up. "He was an invalid. He—"

"Your sister told me," I said. "You can't let yourself go on account of that, kid."

She looked at me with scared eyes. "I think he was murdered. We had a night nurse. Edith took care of him during the day."

Something cautioned me not to get mixed up in this. Maybe, for all of her sweetness, this kid was nutty as a fruit cake. And yet, feeling the way I did about her, I couldn't just pass it off. I sat there without saying anything.

"It could have been so easy," she went on in a whisper. "They said it was heart failure. He was helpless. It could have been so easy to . . ." She dropped her head. "I know it's an awful thing to say, but there were the accidents."

"How is that?"

"Three days after father died I woke up and found the gas heater in my room turned on. All the windows were closed. The door was locked from the outside. I had to break a window."

I could only shake my head.

"A week ago the brakes on my car failed. I was going down the hill from our house and stripped all the gears trying to stop. I had to finally run up against a lamp post. They're hydraulic brakes, and the garage man said the fluid had leaked out some way. He said that hardly ever happened."

"What else?"

She didn't say anything. I could see she was ready to bawl, so I let her alone. Finally she said, "There's something about the house that frightens me. I . . . have the feeling that I'm being watched all the time. That's why I started to go out. Even then it follows me."

"You trying to tell me it's Edith and this guy you're engaged to?"

She nodded, looking at me.

"But why?"

"I suppose it's the money. I have a lot of it, or will have when I'm twenty-one."

"How long is that?"

"Two weeks from tomorrow."

"And if you don't collect she gets it, is that it?"

"Father made the will out quite a few years ago. I'm to inherit the estate when I'm of age. Until then I have an allowance. If I should—should die before then, it goes to Edith."

I TURNED it over. Thinking about that tramp half-sister of hers, it looked like it might do.

"About your father. Did you say anything to the doc who took care of him?"

"He said it was heart failure. But don't you see? They could have—well, smothered him or something like that."

"Well, kid, I don't know. The best thing as I see it is for you to move away from that place for a month or so. Maybe altogether. They can't touch you after you collect."

She got up, looking at me anxiously. "You don't believe me, do you, Pete?"

"It's not that, kid. It's just—hell, you got nowhere to throw a wedge. Even if it's like you say, you got nothing to work with. You get me?"

She nodded slowly, looking off in the distance. "Maybe you're right." She smiled wanly. "Maybe too much imagination, Pete."

"You do like I say. Pack a bag and go off somewhere for a while. Everything'll turn out okay."

"I guess I won't do that." She hesitated. "Can I call you if anything happens?"

I put my hand on her shoulders. There was this feeling between us all right. She sensed it, too. "Listen," I said, and my voice was husky, "you can depend on me at any time."

She smiled real big. "Thank you, Pete. You . . ." She blushed. "You give me that comfort of being protected. We'll work it out somehow—together."

That was the last time I ever saw her alive.

* * *

So she could depend on me, could she? Even now I'm haunted by it. The phone is ringing in the back of my head, and it's that same night all over again. There's terror in her. It reaches across the wires and touches me. I try to quiet her, but the walls are closing in and she has to leave. Her words hammer at my brain

and I know it will always be that way. Why didn't I go right up there and haul her out of that place instead of saying I'd meet her in that same park we'd gone the night before? Maybe then it wouldn't have happened, and I wouldn't have found her dead. . . .

The fog was heavy that night. The bushes were like grey ghosts on either side of the path. I plowed through that smoky film and saw her sitting on that bench. I went over and said, "Hello, kid," but she didn't answer. Right then I knew how it was. I knew she was dead and lost forever.

They had propped her up, but when I touched her she fell over. Her face swam in front of me. Without thought I was talking to her and not moving my lips at all.

"Who did this, kid? Damn them, I'll kill them for you."

"It's too late, Pete. It wasn't your fault, and you can see what happened? You're in it now, Pete. That bartender will remember you. So will the cab driver, and Edith and Bob. The police will be looking for you. You better go, Pete. You better leave fast."

"You said we'd work it out."

"I can't help you now, Pete."

"Yes, you can. You can still help me. But not unless you say it's all right. Not unless you want them to get away with it."

"No, that wouldn't be right. You can do anything—anything you want, Pete. I'm never afraid with you."

"From the minute I saw you . . ."

"I know, I know."

This crazy idea was going through my head. I picked her up and carried her gently to the bushes. I could see the deep marks in her throat, but her face was the face of an angel. I lowered her and the leaves dipped down and made a shroud. I crossed her hands on her breast and left her like that. . . .

CHAPTER THREE

The Silent Dead

I HAD been supposed to meet her at ten. It was twenty past when I reached Market, not yet time for what I meant to do. I cruised along the sidewalk looking at the cabs going by. Then I ran across one parked by Tenth Street. I took the chance.

"A little guy," I said, "wearing a brown cloth jacket. All the time grinning." I told him what I could about the cab driver who had picked us up the night before. He would remember us, and he'd looked like a right joe.

"Can't help you, mister," this driver said. "We got a hundred little guys driving hacks. Some got stands to come back to, some cruise around for fares."

"Thanks," I told him.

A half-hour later I had talked to a dozen drivers and eyed fifty more. By that time I had a lead down to the bus depot, on Seventh, but that had to wait. I went to a drugstore, looked up the number and made the call.

Edith answered. "Yes?"

"This is Pete. You remember?"

There was a slight pause. "Of course. How are you?"

"Fine, just fine. Say, about the kid. She called a while back and asked me to meet her. I guess I got there kind of late. Thought she might have gone back home. She around?"

"Dora? No, she's not here. Where was she supposed to meet you?"

I told her the place.

"I don't like it," she said. "Are you sure she's not there?"

I told her I had looked all over the place. She didn't say anything for a full minute. It was like having your ear glued to a dead connection. I jiggled the hook a couple of times, and when that didn't do any good I knew she had the mouthpiece

covered talking to someone. I had a pretty good idea who that someone was.

When she came around her voice was harsh. "Look here. How do I know something hasn't happened to her? How do I know—"

"Has there?" I cut in.

"Listen to me. You keep away from my sister. You—"

She kept telling me off. I could feel the blood running wild through my whole body. My muscles started knotting up, but there was nothing to do but stand there and take it. I had to play it this way. Finally she got rid of it and banged down the receiver. I jerked on my end as hard as I could. The wire broke and I leaned my head up against the wall and let the trembles run out of me. Then I went outside.

I went to the bus depot and asked questions around, and finally was sure I had my man.

"He's mostly cruising," a newsboy told me, "but ever so often he drops by the stand to see if a fare is waiting."

I waited around there for an hour, trying not to think of the kid up there in the bushes. Finally this cab rolled down Seventh. It was my boy, all right, and I thumbed him down.

"Where to, Mac?" He turned his head and recognized me. He grinned. "Slumming again?"

"Just drive," I said.

We rolled around a few blocks before I leaned over and talked to his ear.

"You like to earn fifty bucks?"

"Fifty'll take you a long ways, Mac."

"I'm not going anywhere. I want the use of the cab."

He thought that over. "For how long?"

"Twenty-thirty minutes. Not longer."

He ran that around for a while. "This hack is my living, Mac. I got a wife and kids. You planning a job?"

"No job," I said. I was tight as a wire inside. It was getting toward that time.

Looking up, I caught sight of his identification card. There was his picture and the name: Benjamin Cohn. "Listen, Benny," I said. "Don't worry about the hack. I could take you along, but it might mean cops. But I swear it's not a job."

I could hear him sighing around that fifty bucks. "Suppose the cops grab you? How do I explain the hack?"

"Tell 'em I pulled a knife on you." I gave him an address. "Give me thirty minutes and you'll find your cab there."

"What do I do meanwhile? Walk the streets?"

I FELT like telling him to take a hike across the bridge, and then I thought of something. I reached over and got the pencil where he had it pushed behind his ear and wrote a name on the inside cover of a matchbook. "Look up this guy's address. He's a lawyer. Be hanging out at his place around two. I want to know if he comes out."

He stopped the cab and turned to look me straight in the eye. "Mac," he said slowly, "I don't like this. But you look like a right guy. Something to do with the dame?"

"That's right, Benny."

"Okay. When do you want the hack?"

"Keep cruising," I said.

It was one-thirty when I took over. Benny climbed out and handed me his uniform cap. "You might as well look the part, Mac."

I paid him the fifty. "Thanks, Benny."

"Just don't scratch the fenders," he said.

I drove straight up there and parked next to the graveled path. About a hundred feet ahead a cop sauntered across the street. He looked my way before cutting into the park. As soon as he was out of sight I slipped up the path. Luck had hold of my hand so far. There was no one around. I ducked into the bushes and picked her up. A few leaves had fallen

on her. I held her close, trying to give her warmth, and the next thing I was talking to her again.

"It won't be long now, kid. Just a little while longer."

"I don't mind, Pete. Hold me tight. Just keep on holding me tight."

My eyes were blurred by the time I reached the cab. I lowered her feet to the ground, holding her close with one arm, and opened the door. Feet pounded along the sidewalk toward us. I wanted to jerk around, but I got the door open and eased her inside. A hand grabbed my shoulder and spun me. I landed one on him before I saw it was the cop. He started to yell and I hit him again. I had to do it for her. That's how I felt when I hit him. He went back and his knees buckled. Before he could get what he was going after beneath his coat, I threw one straight from the shoulder that sprawled him across the sidewalk and onto the lawn. Then I was around the car and behind the wheel.

I had kept the engine running. I threw her into gear and spun tires getting away. We took the first corner on two wheels. After that I cut down on the speed. I couldn't take the chance of a patrol car stopping us. Once, at an intersection, some jerk ran in front of us, waving us down. I gunned past him and heard him curse. For a second I thought I had hit him, but I didn't dare look back.

When we got to where we were going, I turned it in the side street and up the alley. There were a couple of parked trucks back there, and that was all. It was five to two by my watch when I eased in next to his back door. I turned my head and looked at her. She had fallen on her side, her bright hair partly shielding her face.

"Can you wait a few minutes, kid?"

"Don't be long, Pete. Please hurry back."

My head started pounding again, and

that wasn't doing us any good. I waited a while to cool off, then climbed out and closed the door softly. Then I hiked around the corner to his front entrance.

His neon sign was still blazing, but with the windows painted the way they were I couldn't look in. So I waited in the shadows of the next doorway. In a minute a couple of guys staggered out. One of them stuck his head back in and said something I couldn't catch. Then they went on down the street.

I ducked through the door. He was ready to lock up, coming around the bar with a keyring dangling from one hand. There was a wide strip of tape splashed across his nose, and dark splotches showed below both eyes.

"Hey!" he bellowed. "It's after closing time!"

Then he saw who it was and stopped short. He turned and ducked back for the bar. I beat him there and roughed him plenty. I wanted him tame. He started to blubber.

"Turn off your neon and lock the door," I told him.

As soon as he'd got that taken care of, I backed off and let him have one hard enough so he wouldn't move around for a couple of minutes. It was either that or have him bringing her in, and I didn't want him touching her.

I WENT out through the back door and lifted her gently and brought her inside to the booth.

"You just sit there for a minute, kid. That's right—put your head on your arms."

"I don't like it in here, Pete. You won't go away again?"

"I'll be with you from now on, kid. I won't leave you again."

"Then I won't be afraid."

The barkeep stirred and sat up. He stared at us. I kicked him over to the wall phone. He started to yell, then

stopped at whatever he saw on my face. He cringed back against the wall.

After dialing the operator, I got hold of the cops. I told the gruff voice what I wanted. He tried getting nosy, so I went over it the second time. No sirens, I told him. No prowler car in the alley. Just a couple of the boys to come in the back way. He said all right. In five minutes, he said. I told him to make it four and hung up.

After slapping the barkeep upright, I gave him the number and then what to say. By that time he was shaking so I had to punch the dial for him. He was whining when he started to talk.

"Hello," he said. "Hello. This the Blake place? Listen, there's a girl here, passed out, name of Dora Blake. Came in about a half-hour ago, drunk or hurt or something. . . . Yeah, all she wanted was to drink. She's been in my joint before. . . . Listen, I gotta close up, see? . . . You'll be after her? . . . Yeah, the back door. . . . No, she didn't tell me where she lived. I looked in her purse. . . . Okay."

He hung up and I batted him a good one just so he wouldn't try anything

fancy. Then I went around the bar to collect his insurance—a small-caliber automatic. I pushed it in my jacket pocket, him watching me all the time. I hoped I wouldn't have to use it.

After a bit there was a knock on the back door. I walked back there and opened it, and the two of them came inside. The first one was in plainclothes, a stocky man in a trenchcoat and soft hat. The one behind him was in uniform.

"What gives?" the first one said. He walked past me and looked at the barkeep, then at me. "Who called?"

"I called," I said. I waited for the Uniform to go on in, then closed the door. I didn't have much time to explain all this, so I put a fist around the automatic, just in case.

Now Plainclothes saw the kid. He gave her a close look and his eyes were flat when he turned. "What's the mystery?"

I had to give it to him fast, so I stunned him with it. "She's dead." I gave them some of the details then.

When I finished they just stood there for what must have been a minute. Then the detective said, "Okay, we'll give it a chance. On one condition."

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He didn't have to tell me. I went over and put the gun on the bar. He picked it up and nodded the Uniform back there. Then both of them ducked out of sight.

"You're all alone," I told the barkeep. "You remember that."

HE DIDN'T say anything. He just stood there against the bar, looking at the kid. I wanted to say something to her. The words were all jumbled up inside me, but I couldn't think them out. I was afraid, that was it. I was afraid she wouldn't answer.

Finally I tore my eyes away and stepped into the washroom. It was right next to the alley door. Back of me there was a frosted glass with iron bars, and after a bit I saw lights swinging around through it. Then there was the sound of a car door slamming shut and then the back door opening.

I peeked through a crack and watched them come inside, both of them, the woman first. Her face was calm and she was smiling a little as she passed me and saw the barkeep. The lawyer's face was yellow putty.

"Where's the child?" the woman asked, and then she must've caught sight of the kid. "Dora!" she cried.

That's when I stepped out.

The lawyer was blocking me and I gave him a shove that sprawled him halfway to the bar. "Leave her alone," I told the woman.

She stopped and they both stared at me.

"Lucky thing I got here when I did," I said. "You done enough to the kid. Now you're sunk, the both of you. She told me about what you tried to do, and when she walked in here tonight she could hardly talk at first. You didn't do a very good job, Yonkers. You didn't squeeze hard enough or long enough. Ten minutes later she walked away from it."

It was in me to rush them. I wanted to grab their heads and beat them to pulp. A vise clamped around my chest till I could hardly breath. My brain pounded. I took a couple of steps and it was like another guy talking.

"But we've got it now, me and the barkeep. And when she's all right again—when she's all right again," I shouted, "you'll get what's coming to you!"

The woman got it first. She started screaming at the lawyer, only she did it without raising her voice. His face quivered and his hands shook. His guts were running out of his eyes.

But all this wasn't enough. With all the hate telling me to get my hands on them. I still knew it wasn't enough. I took another step, shifting my eyes to the barkeep. "Watch them," I said. "I'm calling the cops."

I had hoped for it, and it happened. The woman dipped a hand inside her purse and came up with a gun. "Stay right there," she said, and her voice cut. She wasn't beautiful now. The mask had slipped. I could see her soul in her eyes, and it was black. I lunged for her just as she pulled the trigger, and when I heard the bullet strike the wall I knew she had missed the kid. She had wanted the kid first. She fell with me and I batted the gun out of her hand. Then I was up and hitting the lawyer, and then hands were grabbing me all over and pulling me back.

THEY came for her. I didn't want them touching her, but they held me back. They lifted her out. Her face was still, like molded wax. Something wrenched deep inside me as they put her on the stretcher. And then I had to find out, I had to say what was inside me.

"I love you, kid. I love you. . . I love you."

They carried her out and she didn't answer. She didn't answer at all.

By
TALMAGE
POWELL

The silk dress
clung enough to
show the lines
of the body. It
was Melissa, all
right. . . .



A HEAD OFF HER SHOULDERS

When Maxie Bemelmens said something, it was as good as done. And when Maxie swore that Melissa was going to have a head to be buried with—well, what else was there to do but go out and get one?

MAXIE BEMELMENS' penthouse was like a huge nerve center in a state of morbid, quiet excitement. Atop a fifteen-story apartment hotel that Maxie owned, the penthouse was everything a penthouse should be, down to the

last shrub growing on the terrace. I stood at the French doors, listening to myself breathe. Now and then the phone tinkled and Leon Myart's smooth voice murmured into it. He was talking to the nerve-ends, men out scouring the city, putting

little pieces of information into a pattern.

Myart said, "He want to see you, Hilliard."

I looked at the closed door across the room. "I hate to go in there."

"I know, but you'd better go on in."

I went in the room. It was a kind of den. There was Maxie pushed back in a big club chair with that sad, sour, dead expression on his face. His thick lips looked grey. I wanted to yell at him to snap out of it. I have never seen anything like it happen before.

Right near Maxie's chair was a large plush couch. On it lay a figure. The silk dress clung enough to show the lines of the body and the hands were at the sides in calm repose. But Melissa's face was missing. In fact, her whole head was missing, severed just above her shoulders.

"Steve," Maxie said, "get Cecil Calhoun. Bring Calhoun here for the job."

"Calhoun, the sculptor?"

"That's right. He's one of the best in the country. Promise up to fifteen grand if you have to."

He reached for a bottle. I saw that he was blind drunk. "Here's the address, Steve."

I TOOK the piece of paper and went out.

Men were on guard at the top and bottom of the elevator shaft. Archie was the one on guard at the front entrance to the building. While I waited for the car to pull around Archie chatted with me.

"Nothing showing down here," he said.

"Myart's narrowing the time element down fast now," I said.

"I don't like that Myart," Archie said. "Colder'n a snake's belly in zero weather." He rolled his eyes up. "Maxie still in there with her?"

When I nodded, Archie looked worried. "It ain't right," he muttered. "It ain't normal. Couldn't you talk to him, Hilliard? Get him to tell the cops about this thing, the way he should?"

"He'd let the cops dog Melissa's murder the way he'd give his dough to charity."

"Nothing good's going to come from it," Archie said. "Somebody is really gunning for Maxie this time, sending him that trunk with Melissa in it that way. Maybe," he added hopefully, "it ain't Melissa after all?"

"It's Melissa, all right. Whoever did it wanted Maxie to know right off that it was Melissa. The shoulder of her dress was pulled down enough to show that birthmark."

Archie fogged smoke out of his nose and shook his head. "Somebody sure hates Maxie!"

"And Melissa," I said.

Oldham pulled the car up to the curb then and I crossed the sidewalk. I got in and handed Oldham the piece of paper with Cecil Calhoun's address.

The address turned out to be an old gingerbread house. A card on the bell button read: "Out of Order." I knocked.

When nothing happened I knocked again. A woman's voice, husky and impatient, called out, "All right, all right. I'm coming!"

The door was jerked open. She was very good looking in a tall, rangy way, the kind of dame you imagine on an archery range or gracing a sleek saddle mount or floating down in a perfect swan dive from a high board. She had long auburn hair that glistened in the sunlight. Her mouth was red and wide, and her eyes were a liquid brown, capable of great expression. She was wearing a smock stained with clay and paint, and there was a clay smudge on her cheek where she'd brushed the back of her hand.

"The Calhoun residence?" I said.

"I'm Cecil Calhoun."

"I hadn't expected to find a woman."

"Neither did my father," she smiled, "and unfortunately named me before I was born. Would you come in?"

She closed the door behind me and crossed the room to get herself a cigarette. The flash of her bare calves and ankles was easy to watch. When she turned she caught me peeking. It didn't fluster her.

The living room was filled with old furniture and cluttered to the point where you knew she didn't care much for housework, or for a lot of servants getting in her way. She cleared away enough magazines from the sofa so I could sit down.

"My name is Steven Hilliard," I said. "I represent Mr. Maximillian Bemelmens. There is a job of sculpting he wishes you to do. But it must be done immediately. You'll work in his penthouse. Anything you need will be supplied."

"Well, really, I—"

"You can check Mr. Bemelmens in Dun and Bradstreet. He wants only the best, but there can be no delay whatever. A certain young lady will have to take a trip shortly, and Mr. Bemelmens wants—"

"A keepsake? A reminder?"

"You could put it that way."

"A bust?"

"Just—the head. But you'll have to go see Mr. Bemelmens now. He instructed me to offer fifteen thousand." I wondered why I'd quoted that top figure right off the bat.

Those eyes of hers expressed pleased surprise. She gave me a careful scrutiny, seemed to decide that I was not too long out of college, one of those young men in a solid business firm who wore a Windsor knot in his tie. It was evident she didn't read the papers too much or she'd have known a little something about Maxie.

"I'll shuck out of this smock," she said.

I relaxed. I had thought I would have more trouble. I watched her leave the room. The smock couldn't quite hide the rhythm of her hips as she walked.

WHEN we got back to the apartment hotel she didn't notice the guards scattered through the building. I wouldn't

have noticed them myself if I hadn't known where to look. We rode the elevator up to the penthouse.

Myart was over at the cabinet that unfolded into a bar, gesturing and mumbling at Dominick and Todd when I ushered Cecil Calhoun in. I wondered what Dominick and Todd had found out.

Myart spun at the sound of our entry. His narrow eyes pulled together, and I said, "Cecil Calhoun."

He looked as if he didn't much like the idea of a girl, but he said, "Maxie's waiting."

I crimped my lips tight on a breath and steered Cecil into the room where Maxie sat. She looked at him and at the thing on the couch and turned back toward the door fast. She looked a little green. She said, "You'll pardon me."

I caught her wrists, my back against the door. Her gaze flashed up into mine. I could feel the warmth of her, the lithe strength of her body. I wondered how expressive those eyes would get in soft darkness alone with some guy she thought a lot of.

"I really am in no serious need of fifteen thousand dollars," she said. "Now if you'll excuse me. . ."

"Sit down!" Maxie said.

She gave me an angry look and sat down.

"Can you sculpt a head from photographs," Maxie asked.

"I suppose, with enough shots from enough angles."

"You'll have enough. I've got dozens of them, from all angles." For an instant Maxie's sour, dead gaze lingered on the thing on the couch. "I won't bury her like that," he said. "She's got to have a head. You make a head of wax and I'll pay you fifteen thousand and then you'll be free to leave."

She looked about the room as if seeking a way out. "I suppose this is one job any sculptor would never forget," she said at

last, squeezing a wry smile across her lips.

"Give her the rumpus room," Maxie said. "Get it cleared. Bring in whatever she wants."

I steered Cecil into the rumpus room. She saw me looking at the darts in the large cork board on the wall. She said, "You don't think I'm a fool, do you? What good would a few darts do?"

"I'll send the photographs in. Make out a list of things you'll need."

She dropped in a modernistic leather chair. "It's driven him crazy, hasn't it, that thing in there?"

"It hit him very hard," I admitted. "When you think of Maxie you think of a guy with steel in his guts, slapping backs, laughing, taking what he wants. When he opened that trunk that she came in, it aged him a thousand years. He's sitting in there like an old, numbed man."

"More like a plotting, insane spider," Cecil suggested. "She must have been quite a gal."

"Honey, I wouldn't even attempt to describe Melissa."

"She was beautiful?"

"More than just that. Not the intellectual type. I guess the animal type would fit her. She was catty, mean, vicious. She'd fly into a rage and throw things. She'd pout. She'd sell you out without batting an eye, see your soul in hell, and suffer acute self-pity if you even suggested she had anything to do with it."

"Some fools go for that type," Cecil conceded.

"Not me."

"What's your type?"

"You."

"That's flattering, considering the source. You must have had a lot of experience with women."

"Not so much so as you'd think."

"This Melissa—where'd she come from?"

"I don't know, before she came to the city. But she cut a wide swath here. First

she married a cheap little bookie. He made the mistake of introducing her to Augie Feldman, who was the biggest bookie in town. After Augie there was a millionaire playboy, an aviator who got famous during the war, and then Roy Meek, who dealt in narcotics. None of them ever stopped loving her."

"She didn't marry them all?"

"No." I laughed at the expression on Calhoun's face. "Only one or two of them."

"After this Roy Meek came your boss?"

"Look, why all the questions?"

"Just interested—and if I'm going to do a head of her I have to know what she was like. There must be some character in the head, mustn't there?"

"Well, after Roy Meek came the boss," I said.

"And what happened to the men who loved her? I mean, she must have left her mark on their lives."

"The millionaire ruined Augie Feldman," I said. "Then the millionaire took to drink when she was through with him. The aviator cracked up—it might have been suicide. Roy Meek landed in prison."

She cut me a look out of the corners of her eyes. "Your boss' doing?"

"You'd better not ask any more questions," I said. "I'll get those photos. You'd better list the things you want."

WHEN I went out Myart was talking excitedly with Fisk. A tall, lean, grey man, Fisk was mopping his face. They turned as I entered the sunken living room.

Myart said, "Roy Meek is out."

I drew up on my toes, remembering. The day Meek had gone to prison. The poisonous hatred Maxie Bemelmens and Roy Meek felt for each other. I could still seem to see Maxie standing in the courtroom, laughing, Melissa on his arm, when sentence had been passed on Meek. Meek

had turned and his eyes had sought Maxie and Melissa out and he had given them a look. That's all, just one long look out of those washed-out cold blue eyes.

"When?" I asked.

"Two days ago. A parole."

"I've been on it all day," Fisk said. "I finally found the rooming house where he checked in when he hit town. But after that first night he hasn't been back there."

"Get back on it," Myart said. "I'll send Oldham over to help you."

When Fisk went out, Myart paced briskly back and forth, stopped before me, rocking on his toes, hands clasped behind him. In the tone of a man delivering a lecture, Myart said, "The ramifications of this thing can be far reaching and charged with disaster, Hilliard. No one outside the organization must know Maxie's real condition. This, Hilliard, is all the work of someone gone mad with hatred for Melissa and Maxie. I doubt that Roy Meek would have the cold nerve to do it.

"But most important—to me—is the organization. The work must go on. Maxie is expending a hundred dollars an hour, bending every effort of our team to track down Melissa's killer. Dozens of people have been questioned, watched, traced. We've examined her movements in detail until one-twenty-five this morning. There we have hit a dead end, a blank wall.

"In the meantime, doubts and wonders about Maxie will be rising all over the city. I want you to go down to the offices. You'll know what to do. Keep things running. Put up a front for at least today."

The phone buzzed. Myart went to it. I stuck my head back in the rumpus room. "I'm going to be out for a while," I said.

Cecil Calhoun looked up from the table where she was jotting on a note pad.

"Just stay in here and you'll be okay, I promise you."

"And I believe I can believe you, Steve Hilliard," she said.

"Calhoun, I like you."

As the afternoon wore on, an air of dread and doubt, like fingers of darkness, stole across the underworld of the city. I knew it from the people I talked with in the offices, the phone calls that came for Maxie that I had to cover. No one outside the organization knew what had really happened, but you can't turn loose a score of human hunters asking questions without causing people in dark places to talk and wonder.

Calhoun was still in the rumpus room when I got back there. I had a tray of food in my hands. I kicked the door closed with my heel. "Your dinner," I said.

"Is it that late? I hadn't noticed."

She had the face of the dart board covered with glossy photos of Melissa, mostly close-ups of Melissa's soft, golden face. She had ruined the ping-pong table with a clutter of tools and plaster of paris scattered everywhere. Midway down the table what looked like a lump of plaster of paris was showing the outlines of a human face.

"I hope you like chop suey," I said.

"Adore it."

She sat down to eat. "I've been thinking about you all afternoon, Steve."

"That's flattering."

"I'm really serious. You don't belong here. This Maxie is a crook, isn't he?"

"Let's say the average man has ten fingers. Maxie has a hundred with each finger in a different place. He can push a lot of weight around, Maxie can."

"But you don't belong with him," she repeated. "You need to put that good-looking, smiling kisser in a brokerage office."

"And get up every morning at seven-thirty, jostle my way through the mob to get home at five, read the paper and go to bed? Set myself up so that a Saturday night bridge game is a big celebration?"

"I wish I knew your early environment," she said. "Something has twisted you up. How did you ever get hooked up with Maxie?"

"I inherited it," I said. "An old uncle raised me. He was a side-kick of Maxie's. Maxie has always regarded me as a son. That's why I have the run of the place, why I'm one of the few people he can trust."

SHE was looking at me with a world of expression in her dark brown eyes. I leaned over and kissed her. She didn't move.

When I took my lips away from hers she said, "I'm sorry you did that."

"Would slapping my face help?"

"Not that kind of sorry. Get out of here, will you!"

I went back in the living room. Myart was on the edge of his chair at the phone. Beads of sweat stood out on his narrow forehead under his patent-leather hair and his waxed mustache had got a little limp. He was saying in agitation: "No! . . . Really? . . . Wonderful!"

He slammed the phone down, turned to me. "We pushed through the blank, Hiliad." He laughed in that way of his, that dry, mirthless sound that wasn't real laughter at all. "Until one-twenty-five this morning we had connected Melissa with no one who might have had a motive to kill her. But Boudreau has found a cab driver who remembers taking her to Augie Feldman's place about two this morning. She wasn't seen after that until she showed up here—in the trunk. Get Feldman, Steve. Boudreau says he just went back to his rooming house after eating in a hash house. Boudreau is watching the place. Dominick is downstairs. Take him with you."

Augie Feldman's rooming house was on the lower side of town in a neighborhood of 1890 houses, huge, gloomy old hulks, that had been converted from once-magnificent private homes. I rolled the car to a stop. Beside me, Dominick stirred ponderously, breathing through his adenoids. "There's Boudreau," Dominick said.

We got out of the car, drifted to the shadow at the far side of the sidewalk. Boudreau said, "He's still in there. Room 10. Upstairs."

"Cover us from here," I said.

The front door creaked and the stairs sighed. Dominick and I stopped before the door of Room 10. We each put a hand under our coats against the pressure of our guns, and I palmed the knob and slammed the door open.

The room smelled. It looked fly-specked and scaly in the light of the one naked bulb. Augie Feldman reared up on the bed, a racing form and pencil in his hands, a cigarette dangling from the middle of his mouth.

I looked at him and remembered him as he had once been, prosperous, sure of himself, heavy on the dough. This quaking, gaunt hulk with the thinning grey hair, slack jowls and fear-haunted eyes was certainly a different man. The big-time bookie was long gone.

He swung his feet to the floor, picked up the overflowing ashtray from the straight chair beside the sway-backed bed and made haste to wipe the ashes, with his palm, that had spilled on the hard bottom of the chair.

"Hello, Steve. Sit down, sit down."

He pushed the chair toward me. I pushed it back. I watched a nervous tic develop in his left eye as he sat on the edge of the bed and stared up at us. The room was hot, close, unpleasant. I said, "What was she doing here in the early hours of morning, Augie."

"You mean Melissa," he whispered.

I waited. He said, "She was around here asking about Roy Meek. She knew how it had been between me and Meek once."

"And how long was she here?"

"Not long." The pouches under his eyes looked heavy and purple. He looked at his hands. "She left about three o'clock this morning, said she was going home."

"You'd better come along and tell it to Maxie."

His gaze darted from Dominick to me. He licked his lips. "I'll get my hat."

We went out of the house with Augie between us. I put him in the back seat of the car between Boudreau and Dominick. When we got back to Maxie's apartment building I got out of the car with Feldman and prodded him across the sidewalk. I would take him up alone. Dominick and Boudreau were both good men, but in a case like this Myart said you could never know for sure, you couldn't be too careful who came into the penthouse.

At the top, Feldman slouched out of the elevator like a man sapped of strength and will. Myart met us in the living room. He looked at Augie with those narrow black eyes and said, "Take him in to Maxie."

I OPENED the door to the den, shoved Augie in. Maxie was standing beside the couch, spread-legged, face slick, a near-empty rye bottle in his hand.

Augie stopped at the sight on the couch. "Melissa," Maxie hissed.

Augie's face seemed to crumble and freeze that way, a thing of grey disjointed angle and shadow.

He stumbled across the room, mouth working, and slipped to his knees. A dry sob racked at his throat.

"You did it!" Maxie said.

Feldman didn't say anything, just stayed there with those dry sobs tearing at him.

"Damn you, talk when I speak to you!" Maxie said. He swung the rye bottle. It hit Augie across the bridge of the nose, brought blood, knocked him over on his back.

I bent over him. "You knocked him out, Maxie."

Maxie wiped his hand across his slack lips. His eyes were burning. Swaying on his feet, he said, "Drag him out in the

living room. Then go down and bring up Georgie. If anybody can make him talk, Georgie can. And I want to watch it."

I dragged Feldman out, Maxie shuffling along after me. He closed the door to the den. Myart's gaze flicked at Maxie, darted to me. "He wants Georgie," I said.

"Georgie's covering the service stairs," Myart said. "In the basement."

I rode the elevator down, all the way to the basement. I stepped out in the warm, dry, heavy shadows. My feet scraped and sent echoes over the cement floor.

I moved back toward the service entrance. "Georgie?"

He didn't answer, and I didn't see him. I opened my mouth to say his name again; then I saw him. Georgie was a big mass of flesh near the dark yawning mouth of the service stairs. I dropped to one knee beside him. He was breathing, but as unconscious as a guy could get, a lump like a golf ball on the side of his head. I felt it then, the faint, cold draft of an open window.

I spun around fast, wanting to get the wall at my back, my hand dipping toward my gun.

"Do it and die," a voice said.

I saw his face, hovering there in the shadows beside a boiler. He came toward me, a big gun stuck out in his fist. I tried to swallow and couldn't. I tried to tear my eyes from his face and couldn't.

"You'll take me up, Hilliard," he said, mouthing the words thickly. "You'll take me right up to Maxie."

"Listen, Meek, you can't do it! You'll never get out of the building alive."

"Do you think I care?" Roy Meek said. He was doped to the gills, the rims of his eyes like frozen trickles of blood. But maybe he wouldn't have needed the drug anyway.

"Do you know what it was like?" he whispered. "The same cell every day, every night. I had given her everything, my money, my very life, everything! I

lived only to get out, to come back! No other man would ever have the pleasure of looking at that angel face and tawny hair again!"

Roy Meek looked at my face and laughed, so softly it was a bare whisper of sound in the stark basement. "Just take me to Maxie," he breathed dreamily. "One minute with Maxie—and then I'll never be sad again."

HE HERDED me with the gun. I was breathing hard. My collar was limp with sweat. Into the elevator.

The elevator rose slowly. The fifteenth. Maxie's floor. "Open the door," Meek hissed.

I opened the door. He slammed me with the gun, and I stumbled out into Maxie's living room and fell to my knees.

Feldman wasn't in the same place where I'd left him. And I saw that Maxie's knuckles were covered with blood, and dimly I knew that Cecil Calhoun had crept out of the rumpus room. There must have been another tussle between Maxie and Feldman, and she had heard it, heard Maxie knocking Augie unconscious for the second time.

I tried to crawl to my feet. I got one glimpse of Maxie's face, like a blurred, frozen thing. Behind me, Meek was sobbing out laughter. "It's me doing it, rat! Me—Roy Meek!"

Then he began shooting. He shot Maxie four times. Myart had dived behind a couch. I had rolled out of the way, yelling to Calhoun to get down.

Then everything was silent. Meek whirled, leaped into the elevator, slammed the door, and the cage dropped away.

Myart came crawling out from behind the couch. Calhoun was helping me to my feet.

I stood up, shook my head to clear it. Myart snarled, "Get him, Steve! Get the stinking, hopped-up rat!"

Calhoun grabbed my arm, her face very intense. "Have you ever done anything like that before? Like killing a man on Myart's orders?"

"No," I said.

"Then it's not too late."

Staring into her face, thinking of all the blood and violence, I realized what she meant.

I said, "Myart, if you want Roy Meek go get him yourself."

I took Calhoun's arm, and led her out.

A WEEK later I was in Calhoun's house, showing her how to grill a steak.

"How's it going?" she asked.

"I've quit fighting the alarm clock every morning."

"That's fine. One of these days you'll own that brokerage house."

After we finished off the steak, she said, "I want to show you something." I followed her into her studio. She turned on a white, bright light. My heart skipped a beat as I looked at the waxen head on the table. "Melissa!" I said.

"I had to do it," she said. "It was inside my mind. It kept bothering me. I had to get it out."

I looked at the head a long time, thinking of Maxie who was dead and whose organization had ruptured at every seam like a rotten apple bursting. And I thought of Augie Feldman and of Roy Meek, whom the cops had cornered after he'd killed Maxie.

I saw then what Calhoun had done with the head; after a few minutes the head seemed to change, and beneath the soft oval face and tawny hair it seemed I could see the real Melissa, a death's head, a grinning skull. I don't know how Calhoun managed to get that in her piece of work, but I knew the head would be around a long time, to remind us, to make us remember. . . .



FIRE- BRINGER!

By
WILLIAM BRANDON

He ran on, sobbing for breath, the gravel tearing his bare feet. He ran all the way to the police station. . . .

Calmly, coldly, Pascal consigned the old man's body to the flames . . . the same flames that had consumed first the old man's money — and now led Pascal down a strange nightmare path. . . .

IN VERMONT, Pascal found the safety he had been seeking. He took lodging in an unpretentious summer boarding house, a neat white-galleried farmhouse on the outskirts of the neat white village of Jordan. As it was early in the summer, June, he was for a time the family's only guest, until after ten days

or so of this a school teacher and her mother, evidently regular summer visitors, appeared. That suited him better; it made him less conspicuous, less the single target for the curiosity of the surrounding community.

On the excuse of the poor health he pretended, Pascal could now continue to

keep to a withdrawn solitude as long as he pleased and be confident that, whenever he was noticed, he was now taken for granted. He felt completely secure and as much at ease as his conscience and his memory would allow. New Mexico seemed as distant as another planet.

He intended to find a place to hide the money more carefully later on, but for the time being he rolled it in a shirt and stuffed it up the fireplace chimney in his room.

The school teacher said, "You look better, Mr. Pascal. I believe the country must be doing you some good."

"There's no doubt of it," Pascal said with enthusiasm. "I feel better than I have in months." He said it sincerely. For the first time he was beginning to feel free and to enjoy himself, stretch his arms and breathe deeply and notice the pleasantness of the night and the luminous new moon. He was on the verge of forgetting; he felt something like elation at each new pleasure that met his senses—something he had been entirely oblivious to these last haunted weeks. It was like a new life.

The school teacher herself, Annis Williams, was part of it. Pascal was aware of her interest in him, and it seemed a long time since he had thought about women. Miss Williams was patently on the prod for a husband, and as plainly measuring Pascal for the part, and this pleased and reassured him, for Miss Williams was blonde and slim and fairly pretty and not too old, and he guessed shrewdly that all that had kept her single so far was a stiff shyness that she took out in formality. But her presence at least filled out the picture of what was now becoming a comfortable vacation.

"It's so good, you know," Miss Williams said, "to get away from things."

Pascal answered a little sharply, "Yes. Yes, that's a fact."

"If one could only sit like this forever," Miss Williams murmured, "and

just sort of let the time drift away."

Pascal stirred on the glider and flung his arm along the back of it so that it touched Miss Williams' shoulders. She stared straight ahead, as if she didn't notice it. They remained so, talking desultorily in low voices, and watched the moon sail up over Burke Mountain. They were close together, with his arm quite frankly around her, when Miss Williams' mother came out from the radio and broke it up. Pascal went up to bed feeling nearer to a fullness of contentment than he would have thought possible two weeks before, and for the first time since it had happened he dropped off to sleep thinking not of death but of the yielding softness of Miss Williams' shoulders.

THERE was the smell of smoke in his nostrils, stinging his eyes, smothering his breath, and he fought the dream away in wild panic and then, stumbling blindly in the darkness, realized with a feeling of horror that it was not a dream but reality. For a moment he could not remember where he was. He saw, as he scrubbed the tears frantically away from his eyes, the glowing ashes in the fireplace, but for an instant they had taken on the shape of the flaming skeleton of a house.

His perspective in the darkness was such that his sleep-filled mind could not tell whether the fire was large or small for one agonized heartbeat, and then he plunged madly to it and scattered the live coals with his hands. Choking in the smoke, he reached up the warm chimney and dragged out the shirt full of money; it was smoldering, and he beat out the fire with his hands and switched on the light and poured out the money on the floor. It was there, undamaged. One packet of bills was browned around the edges, no more than that.

He collected the money again, dug a tin tackle box out of his luggage and threw the gear out of it. Then he stuffed the

banknotes in its place and buried the box in the corner of a tall wooden wardrobe set across one corner of the room. He threw the window wide open to let out the smoke and sat down again on the bed, trembling. He left the light on.

There had been some paper, some trash, in the fireplace. How had it caught fire? Who had lit it? All the ease and freedom he had felt a few hours before was gone, in its place a fear and a memory more vivid and sharpened, far more terrifying than it had been before.

He sat up the rest of the night.

Mr. Pelgen, the farmer, was not mystified as to the origin of the fire. Mr. Pelgen was the type of man who is not mystified by anything—if he didn't know he said he did. Nothing ever found him in doubt; he liked to talk too well, like all good Vermonters.

"Why, that's easy to figure out," Mr. Pelgen said. "Spontaneous combustion. Heard of it a thousand times. More than that, had it start in my hay once and burn my barn down. New barn that summer, too. Why, I suppose there was some rags and dust and one thing and another laying there and they just took fire."

Pascal said, "I thought the material had to be stuffed away out of the air for spontaneous combustion. I don't see how it could happen in a fireplace."

"You don't, eh?" Mr. Pelgen smiled genially, as if he were making allowances. "Well, now, you don't think someone went in your room and lit it, do you? Well, then, there it is. By gosh, you've got a fire that wa'nt lit—you've got spontaneous combustion, I guess. Can't get

around that, can you?" Mr. Pelgen slapped him on the back and told him not to worry about it. As long as spontaneous combustion restrained itself to the fireplaces he would be more than satisfied, and he went out about his chores.

IT WAS several days before Pascal came around to accepting Mr. Pelgen's theory, and it was several nights before he slept, anything more than short naps ending with a startled awakening in the dark.

Miss Williams remarked that he did not look well, and, when he encouraged her, she was tender and solicitous. He went with her to a square dance and again to a picture show, and gradually the memory again slipped out of his thoughts, and the fear with it, until the night that the wardrobe burned.

He saved the tin box of money, hid it under his mattress before the others, aroused by the noise and smoke, had found his room, and the fire was put out without damage to anything more than the clothes he had had hanging in the wardrobe. The massive piece of furniture itself would have been impervious to anything less than an open-hearth furnace.

Mr. Pelgen came forward again with spontaneous combustion, but somewhat doubtfully, and with a close look at Pascal that seemed to wonder if they were not boarding a pyromaniac. More than anything else, Pascal wanted to leave the place now, but he was afraid—afraid of the talk after he was gone, afraid of the suspicion that could be aroused and directed after him, and that would only

Like money . . .



. . . in the bank!

smother if he should stay on and nothing else should happen.

Miss Williams became alarmed, she said, about his condition. She wanted to call a doctor. Pascal assured her it was nothing but nerves. He was afraid now of Miss Williams' sour, suspicious-eyed mother, but there again he must do nothing, nothing to attract more attention to himself than he had already received, nothing to arouse anyone against him. He had wanted Miss Williams' company before; he had to put up with it now; it would be thought strange if he should suddenly avoid her.

Two nights later his bed caught fire. He was not hurt; when he came awake he was already on the floor, beating at the smoldering mattress. This time he was careful, through the desperation that enveloped him, to be quiet, so that the others in the house should not know of it. He got out the box of money—the tin box was warm—and put it in his trunk, and locked it in, and set the trunk against the wall in plain sight where he could watch it. He folded a newspaper for a shade over the light in his room and thereafter intended to leave it burning at night.

The next night he dozed off, watching the trunk. The smell of smoke always seemed to be with him now, day and night. He awoke, leaping from bed, swaying unsteadily in the middle of the floor, looking for the smoke he could smell so plainly. He sprang upon the trunk and dragged it to the center of the room directly under the shaded light. Smoke was issuing from its cracks.

He unlocked it and tore it open. The same smoldering slow fire, the same framework of glowing coals collapsing under his pounding hands like the skeleton of a burning house. Pascal grabbed up the box of money and ran outside without dressing, out of the house. Behind him he heard someone open a window and heard a voice, but he ran on, sobbing for

breath, the gravel of the road hurting his naked feet. He ran all the way to the Jordan police station.

The village police force, at night, consisted of only one officer. By morning the rest of the force, the chief, had arrived. Later a doctor, the town manager and a selectman came in and out, but Pascal, waiting in his cell, did not see them.

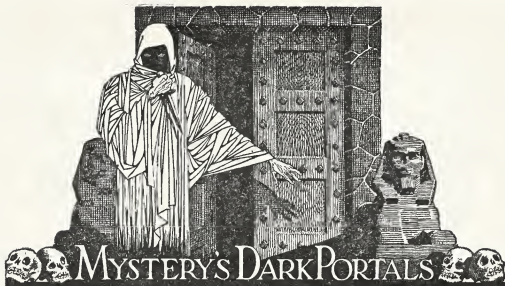
At noon the chief came back and released him. "We're going to turn you loose," he said, "but let this be a lesson to you. Don't come running down the street in your pajamas again. We've brought your clothes down here for you."

"Turn me loose?" Pascal said. "No, you can't! I told you! I confessed! I'm a murderer! I killed a man, robbed him of six thousand dollars. I burned his body in his house! I confessed! Send me back!"

"We've been in touch with New Mexico," the chief told him, "and they don't want you for anything. That house burned where you said it did, but there wasn't anybody in it. They said the old man in it had gone down to live with a brother in Mexico, and as for having six thousand dollars—they say he's an Indian sheepherder that never had five cents, so my advice to you is to get this idea out of your head, and stop making trouble for—"

"I did it!" Pascal said hoarsely. "I tell you I did it! I made him write on the postcard and send it before I killed him! I made him write that he was going away! I knew he had money! He'd done nothing but work and save his whole life! I knew it! I've got it! I killed him to get it! I burnt his damned shack, up there in the mountains! Can't you understand? I'm confessing! Send me back! I'll show them how I did it. I'll tell them. I had to light it again and again, again and again—the old man wouldn't burn! I tell you—I can't ever forget . . ." Pascal buried his face in his hands.

(Continued on page 112)



STRANGE FLOWERS grow out of strange soil, it is said, and perhaps, for that reason, out of the lush soil of the tropics come at once the most exotic and the most deadly growths. Perhaps a magazine can be said to influence its surroundings like that. Certainly, each day's mail brings many bizarre tales, many fiction, many purportedly true. And every day someone pops in, a friend, perhaps, or a visiting author to add his little bit to our store of strange phenomena.

This story came from Johnny Longstreet, and Johnny swears it is true. Of course, if you knew Johnny you would realize that Johnny is a kidding man, and you might take what he says with a grain of salt. But not this time. For this is Johnny Longstreet's special story, and no matter how often he tells it, it never varies. Perhaps that is why it impressed us here at DIME MYSTERY as being true.

Johnny never talks very much about his business, but everybody around Paddy's Bar knows that he's in the second-hand machinery business—old motors and lathes and what-not—and that his place of business is in an old brick building somewhere down around Canal Street. A very old building it is—one of those places with the

old-time hoist-type elevator still in it. There aren't many elevators like that left in New York, and the few that are still around are going fast.

The elevator operator in the building, Willie Something-or-other—nobody ever knew his last name—was just about as old as the elevator, Johnny always claimed, and he and Johnny had known each other a long time. In fact, there was a real friendship and respect between them. Willie would always ask how Mrs. Longstreet was and how were the children, and Johnny would come up with an extra ten-spot or so every time Willie had another grandchild. And Willie was always having another grandchild. Of course, this was back before the war, when a tenner was still money.

Well, as we said a moment ago, Johnny was quite a kiddier. He had certain long-standing jokes with Willie. Willie's huge brown eyes would roll around in his head in enjoyment and his grey head would go back, and his chocolate-brown face would break into enormous wrinkles of laughter. Not that the jokes were that funny; it was that Willie felt a real affection for Johnny and showed it by laughing at Johnny's gags. He never laughed out loud, really,

but the effect was there, even though the mirth was soundless.

While he laughed, Willie's thin arms would keep working that old elevator cable. It ran right through the car, coming in through a hole in the ceiling. It was a slow way to get the elevator to the top, but Johnny was never in a hurry, and the place suited him fine.

He had a standard routine with Willie. First he would say, "By God, Willie, no matter how much practice you get, this thing seems to move as slow as ever."

Willie's eyes would go round in circles. "Yes, suh, it sure do."

Then Johnny would say, "By God, Willie, sometimes I think they must have installed you with the elevator when they built this place."

Willie would chuckle inaudibly. "Yes, suh, Mr. Longstreet, I guess that's about right."

By that time the elevator would be nearing Johnny's floor, and Johnny would say, "By God, Willie, I bet when they got you laid out all pretty in the coffin, someone's going to say, 'Fifth floor, Willie,' and you'll get right up and start hauling on that cable."

Willie would laugh again. "Yes, suh, I expect I will."

That was how it was.

Then came the war. Johnny wasn't so young any more, but everybody else seemed to be going, so Johnny doubled his life-insurance policies and joined up.

A lot of time passed and a lot of bitter experience and most of what was left of Johnny's youth. Something else went, too. Johnny's eyesight. A German sniper's bullet did that. Johnny came marching home very slowly, a cane on his left arm, a Seeing Eye Shepherd dog leading him around.

But Johnny's spirit and his love for a gag was still there. A million sniper's bullets couldn't have touched that.

It was a gay day for Johnny when he

felt that he was recovered enough to leave the house and go down to his place. He didn't feel up to taking the subway yet, so he got a cab and gave the old address. A few minutes later he got out and walked into the old brick building.

There was only one elevator in the building, and Johnny had no trouble finding his way into it. He had gone there often enough before the war.

"Fifth floor, Willie," he said, although he knew he didn't have to say a word. The elevator, the way Johnny tells the story, kind of trembled for a minute, and then, slowly, it started up.

"By God, Willie," Johnny said, "no matter how much practice you get, this thing seems to move as slow as ever."

"Yes, suh, it sure do," Willie's voice came to Johnny.

"By God, Willie," Johnny went on, "sometimes I think they must have installed you with the elevator when they built the place."

"Yes, suh, Mr. Longstreet"—Johnny could almost see the lips break into a grin—"I guess that's about right."

Johnny grinned himself, he was feeling so good about being home. "By God, Willie," he said. "I bet when they got you all laid out pretty in the coffin, someone's going to say, 'Fifth floor, Willie,' and you'll get right up and start hauling on that cable."

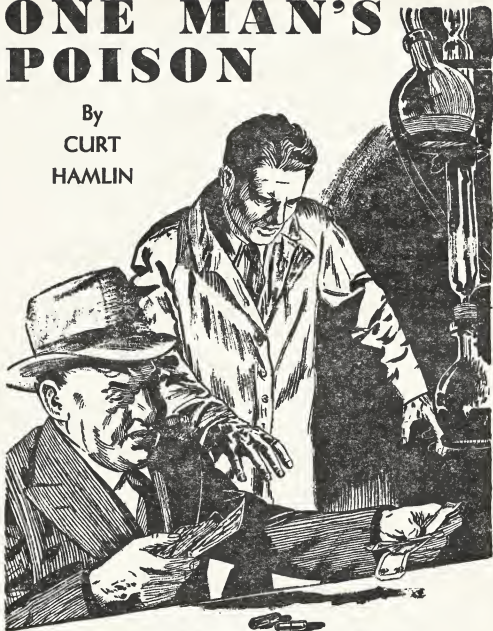
This time Willie's chuckle was audible. It was the first time Johnny had ever heard Willie laugh out loud, and it startled him. "Yes, suh," Willie said, and he chuckled again. "I expect I will."

There was kind of a cold draft coming through the elevator, and it hit Johnny about then. This was strange because a closed elevator shaft isn't the kind of place for drafts. Johnny felt little goose-pimples break out on his back, and at his feet the German Shepherd growled a little. Not angrily, but just sort of worried.

(Continued on page 113)

ONE MAN'S POISON

By
CURT
HAMLIN



"Cash," said Mr. Petten, and laid out five twenties. "Fair and square."

*The dark young man was happy
to fill Mr. Petten's prescription.
. . . Poison for two? Gladly!*

THE SIGN rather amused Mr. Petten. He thought it clever. He saw it, of course. His eyes were small, deep-set in his fat cheeks like halved grapes pushed into a bowl of lumpy gruel, but those eyes missed very little. It

wasn't the big sign that interested him. That was simply the name—HARITH'S—lettered in tarnished gilt over the door. The other was quite small, a footnote done in black paint at a lower corner of the single display window.

Prescriptions for Difficult Cases

Chuckling to himself, he pushed open the door and waddled inside.

The outer room of the place was no more than six-by-eight, empty except for an elderly, straight-backed chair that leaned wearily against one wall. At the back were a grilled window and a narrow doorway with a swinging door. Mr. Petten moved over and peered between the bars of the window. Inside, a dark young man in a white, linen coat was hunched over a table, inking entries into a large ledger. He raised his head as Mr. Petten stared in at him, and nodded pleasantly.

"Yes?"

"I'm George Petten," said Mr. Petten ponderously.

"Petten?" The young man marked his place in the ledger and closed it slowly; his eyes thoughtful. "Petten. Yes. Of course. Petten." He rose and came through the swinging door, blotting ink-stained fingers with a wad of cotton. "What can I do for you?"

"I want to see the manager."

"I'm the manager," said the young man, "and the druggist, and the clerk. In short, I own the place."

Mr. Petten scowled and shuffled his thick, broad feet uncertainly. "I expected someone older."

The young man rolled the cotton into a ball and tucked it neatly away in a trouser pocket. "My dear sir," he said gently, "I studied for years under my father. Since his death I have discovered a good many things even he didn't know. You have nothing to worry about. Absolutely nothing." He grasped Mr. Petten by one arm and urged him through the swinging door. "We can talk more comfortably in

here. Also, it's absolutely private."

The inner room was as crowded as the outer had been bare. The walls were tiered by narrow shelves, all of them lined with bottles, jars, and flasks. There was a large sink, the drainboards on either side of it littered with a variety of chemical equipment.

The dark young man brought out a second chair, dusted it lightly with the sleeve of his jacket, and pushed it into place. "I'm interested to know how you heard of me."

Lowering himself, Mr. Petten waved a plump, vague hand. "Somebody told me. I'm not sure who it was. At a party, I think."

"You don't remember?"

"No. Does it make a difference?"

"I hardly think so," said the young man, smiling a soft smile. "No, I hardly think so. Not in this case. Well, now." He folded his hands on the table top and leaned over them. "If you'll please tell me about your problem."

MR. PETTEN'S eyebrows curled like furry caterpillars. "I'll do no such damned thing. I came here to buy something. You're here to sell it to me. I'll buy it and leave. That's the end of it."

"Don't be an ass," the young man said calmly. "I'm a specialist. A specialist has to know the facts. Cases differ. A member of the family, for example, is quite a different problem from, say, a casual acquaintance. Even you should be able to see that."

Mr. Petten reddened and puffed angry lips. "It's both."

"Two?" asked the young man. "Well! You *have* a tidy little project set for yourself, haven't you?" He pulled at one earlobe, regarding Mr. Petten with interest. "Go on."

"The rest of it's none of your damned business."

"If it wasn't my business," snapped the

young man sharply, "you wouldn't be here. If you won't be reasonable, get out. I've work to do."

Reopening the ledger, he picked up his pen and set to making entries in a careful, neat hand.

Mr. Petten fumed. He sucked his teeth. He blew out his cheeks. He tapped the tips of his fingers ominously on his paunchy middle. "All right," he finally muttered. "Have it your way."

"Eh?"

"I said have it your way. I'll tell you. Only this makes you an accessory before the fact. Don't forget that."

The young man smiled a little and closed the ledger again. "I'll take that chance."

"Damned right you will," said Mr. Petten. "Damned right. Now. The first one's my wife. Marion. She's twenty-seven. We've been married three years. I bought her and paid for her. That's the way I do business. Put my money on the line and take delivery. All I expect is a fair return on my investment. Get what I mean?"

The young man murmured smiling agreement.

"Right," said Mr. Petten. "Fair return. Only I'm not getting it. There's another man."

"Ah."

"Get what I mean?"

"Perfectly."

"I was thinking," said Mr. Petten, "of

poison. Something that couldn't be traced."

The young man put back his head and gave a short, hard laugh. "My dear sir," he chuckled, "you've been reading these murder books. There's no poison known that can't be found by an expert analyst. Now in my father's day . . ." He broke off to stare reminiscently at the ceiling, then shrugged his shoulders. "However, that's neither here nor there. The fact is, the science of detection has advanced beyond all reasonable bounds. What used to be a simple problem in murder is no longer simple. Quite the contrary."

"Um." Mr. Petten gloomily regarded the floor.

"Don't worry," said the young man. "I'll fix you up with something. Let me see. Does your wife—Marion, I think you said her name was—like any particular kind of food?"

"Food?"

"Yes. Like fish. Or mushrooms. Or—"

"Mushrooms," said Mr. Petten. "She's crazy about mushrooms."

"Excellent."

"Eh?"

"I said that was excellent. Now then. The—er—gentleman in question? Is he also fond of mushrooms?"

"Him? He's the one that got her started on them. Never used to have the blasted things. Now we have them all the time. Having them tonight." Mr. Petten spat. "Never touch them myself."



"Better and better." The young man gave his hands a brisk, cheerful rubbing. "Tell me—does the gentleman come often to dinner?"

"He comes," Mr. Petten said sourly, "every night. Every single, blasted night of the week."

"And tonight you're having mushrooms?"

"I said so, didn't I?"

"Fine," said the young man, rising from his chair. "Tonight, Mr. Petten, you eat mushrooms along with the rest of them. Don't forget. That's important."

He went to the rear of the room, opened a cabinet and fumbled about inside. Coming back, he placed two small vials on the table in front of Mr. Petten. One was red, the other blue, and each contained a liquid of uncertain color. "The red one," he explained, "contains muscarine. And some other things. Muscarine is a mushroom poison."

Mr. Petten poked at the red vial with a suspicious forefinger. "How does it taste?"

"Very pleasant," said the young man. "An old recipe of my father's. And simple to use. You just pour it into the mushroom sauce. It does the rest."

Mr. Petten's face went suddenly pale. "But if I eat—"

The young man chuckled. "You'd better let me finish. Listen. If three people eat a meal, and two of them die while the third remains perfectly all right, the police are going to get suspicious. But if the third one gets sick, even though he doesn't die, there's no particular reason for suspicion. The point is, Mr. Petten, you get sick but you don't die." He indicated the blue vial. "That's where the other stuff comes in."

Mr. Petten prodded the blue vial. "What is it?"

"An antidote," said the young man. "A really remarkable antidote. Different. You take it *before* you take the poison. At

least six hours before. That way, no one can ever suspect you've taken it. By the time you eat the mushrooms, all traces of this will have vanished." He pushed the two vials together and stepped back, beaming. "That," he said, "will be five hundred dollars. For both of them."

Mr. Petten reared up in his chair. "What!"

"Very moderate, I think," the young man stated.

"It's outrageous," shouted Mr. Petten. "It's highway robbery. 'It's—'"

"Of course," the young man said gently, "you could always use a gun. The only thing is, the police have such an embarrassing way with guns."

"Look here." Mr. Petten pounded the table with a fat, forceful hand. "I don't believe in buying pigs in a poke. For all I know those damned things may be filled with common tap water."

The soft, wise smile curled on the young man's lips. "You could try one of them," he suggested. "The red one, for example. I'm sure—"

"I'll do no such thing," Mr. Petten snapped. "Now you listen to me. I'm a business man. I'll make you a business proposition. I'll pay you a hundred dollars now. If the stuff works the way you say, I'll pay you the remainder. You can trust me."

The young man hesitated a long moment. Finally he nodded wearily. "All right. It's a deal."

"Cash," said Mr. Petten. He reached for a plump wallet, laid out five twenties, and picked up the two vials. "Fair and square. Cash."

They walked together through the outer room. Mr. Petten went into the street. The young man stood in the doorway. Mr. Petten jerked a thumb at the gold-lettered sign. "Harith. That you?"

The young man shook his head. "He was the original owner," he said. "He—"

(Continued on page 114)

A Friend of The Grim Reaper

By SKIPPY ADELMAN

FORTY-SIX-YEAR-OLD Jake Bird was brought before the bar of justice in Spokane, Washington, for a particularly messy offense; he was accused of chopping to death with an axe a middle-aged woman and her seventeen-year-old daughter.

Due to the brutality of his crime, Jake inspired little pity among those in the courtroom. His court-appointed lawyer, J. W. Selden, tried time and time again to withdraw from the case, once telling Judge E. D. Hodge, "My heart does not beat in sympathy for this man, who fixed his life as more important than that of others." Judge Hodge reminded Selden that as a lawyer he was a sworn officer of the court; he ordered the lawyer to continue defending Jake to the best of his ability.

To the surprise of no one, Jake was found guilty of murder and sentenced to be hanged. As he was being led away to the death house Jake's bitterness at those who had a hand in his conviction finally erupted into words. "I'm throwing a hex on everyone connected with this case," he told Detective-Lieutenant Sherman Lyons. "Wait and see—you lawyers, judges and policemen will be sitting and waiting at the Pearly Gates long before I roll up." Lyons was about to dismiss this fantastic threat with a good-natured laugh, but something about the way Jake looked at him stopped the sound half way up his throat.

A month later, Judge Hodge, a man who had always enjoyed excellent health, dropped dead of a heart attack.

No one thought of connecting Jake's hex and the judge's death until shortly

"You'll all be sitting at the Pearly Gates long before I roll up," Jake Bird told that court. And to the tune of five dead men, Jake Bird—so far—has been right!

thereafter Undersheriff Joe Karpach, who had questioned Jake closely with a view towards connecting him with some unsolved murders in another state, also suffered a heart attack and died suddenly.

A few weeks later Ray Scott, chief clerk of the court, who often had bragged he had never suffered a day of ill health, was the third to be suddenly stricken with a fatal heart attack.

Seven months went by with no more deaths among the people who had been a part of the machinery that caused Jake's death sentence. The survivors of the Jake Bird murder trial began dismissing the three deaths as curious coincidences. Then it happened again. Detective-Lieutenant Sherman Lyons, the man to whom Jake had made his threat, keeled over dead from a heart attack!

Those people who actually believed in the potency of Jake's hex were particularly curious about the good health being enjoyed by the man Jake probably hated the most, J. W. Selden, his unwilling defense counsel. Their faith in Jake's dark powers was strengthened when on November 26, 1948 Selden's heart—the one he had told the court did not "beat in sympathy" for Jake Bird—ceased beating altogether. Selden was the fifth to die.

Adventures into



THE TALKING MEN

CHARLES READE, THE GREAT ENGLISH REFORMER AND WRITER, AUTHOR OF "THE CLOISTER AND THE HEARTH," MENTIONS IN ONE OF HIS NOVELS AN UNCANNY SUPERSTITION PREVALENT IN YORKSHIRE, ENGLAND, KNOWN AS THE "GABRIEL HOUNDS."

THIS WAS AN EERIE SOUND THAT PASSED THROUGH THE NIGHT AIR CLOSE OVERHEAD. THE NOISE RESEMBLED THE BAYING OF A PACK OF HUNTING DOGS AND IT WAS SAID TO PRECEDE A CALAMITY.

THERE WAS NO QUESTION IN THE MINDS OF THE SUPERSTITIOUS THAT THIS SOUND WAS CAUSED BY A GHOSTLY PACK OF HOUNDS AND THEY FIRMLY BELIEVED THAT MISFORTUNE FOLLOWED, FOR ALL WHO HEARD IT.

WEIRD SOUNDS IN THE AIR ARE FACT, AND NOT UNCOMMON. THEY ARE HEARD IN MANY PARTS OF THE WORLD AND TAKE MANY FORMS, SOMETIMES EVEN OF THE HUMAN VOICE. THERE IS AN EXAMPLE OF THE LATTER TODAY IN THE MALAY PENINSULA, AND THEY ARE WELL AUTHENTICATED.



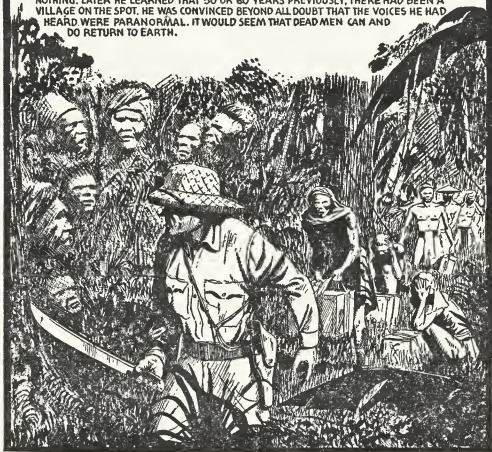
the UNKNOWN

By—
Frederick
Blakerlee

NATIVES FEAR THESE SPECTRAL VOICES AND WILL ON NO ACCOUNT GO NEAR AN AREA WHERE THEY ARE HEARD. WHITE MEN TOO HAVE HEARD THEM AND CANNOT ACCOUNT FOR IT. UNLIKE THE CONVENTIONAL "GHOST" THESE VOICES OF THE DEAD ARE HEARD IN BROAD DAYLIGHT. THEY TAKE THE FORM OF MANY MEN TALKING TOGETHER, AND THE PHENOMENON IS KNOWN AS THE "ORANG BUNIAN"—LITERALLY, "MEN MAKING A NOISE" OR "THE TALKING MEN."

THE UNCANNY THING ABOUT THESE VOICES IS THAT THEY ARE ALWAYS HEARD OVER THE SITE OF A LONG VANISHED VILLAGE. IT IS ALSO A WELL-ESTABLISHED FACT THAT IN THE NORTH OF THE PENINSULA, WHERE VILLAGES WERE LARGER, THE VOICES ARE LOUDER. THESE VOICES WERE HEARD BY A WELL-KNOWN ENGLISH BOTANIST, MR. HENRY RIDLEY, WHILE ON A TRIP THROUGH THE JUNGLE IN WESTERN SINGAPORE JUST BEFORE WORLD WAR II. HE HEARD ABOUT A DOZEN MEN TALKING TOGETHER AND HIS NATIVE BEARERS, PARALYZED WITH FEAR, REFUSED TO MOVE.

MR. RIDLEY, ON LEARNING THAT THE VOICES WERE SUPERNATURAL, INVESTIGATED. HE LOCATED THE SOUND AND WALKED ALL AROUND AND THROUGH THE VOICES—BUT SAW NOTHING. LATER HE LEARNED THAT 50 OR 60 YEARS PREVIOUSLY, THERE HAD BEEN A VILLAGE ON THE SPOT. HE WAS CONVINCED BEYOND ALL DOUBT THAT THE VOICES HE HAD HEARD WERE PARANORMAL. IT WOULD SEEM THAT DEAD MEN CAN AND DO RETURN TO EARTH.



By
H. FREDRIC
YOUNG



For Tony, Steve always had the same answer: "Nuts," he'd say.
Or, "Go lay an egg."

PASSAGE TO PURGATORY

For nine minutes, Steve Mahoney died. That was hardly time enough for Steve to decide whether—on the next trip—he'd go Upstairs, or stick with Tony Rufino and the boys, on the long and bloody roller-coaster to Hell!

OUT of the darkness somebody gave a tight-throated yell, but the warning came too late. The crane boom raked against the high-tension line, raising fire that shot in sizzling streaks toward the overcast of fog. The bay below, slopping back and forth, glittered momentarily with this drizzle of bluish heat. Eleven thousand volts of escaping juice

fired the hoist cable with gaudy gossamers of light. From the cable it sang its way into the big steel hook and did a shimmy dance through the cable-sling supporting the engine. Smoke was thick, but through it the dazzle was akin to a burlesque marquee on Saturday night. You could see it now, rampaging through the man's body whose grease-coated hands were

steering the giant suspended engine.

Steve Mahoney died, while fire made smoke of his eyelashes and men screamed in dumb helplessness about him.

It had seemed to Steve, during that briefest of moments he had left to think, that he was doing the thing he had always wanted to do, because it all seemed significantly brave to himself that he could take the Big Rap on his chin with a smile on his puss. What he didn't realize was that the moment would last so long and take him back so far.

He actually had the sensation of holding an hour's sly and guileless conversation with himself.

He seemed to wonder just how long would be the enchanting trip from here to *there*; well, he'd know soon.

He would miss many pleasant things here. That much he conceded. But beyond that, he told himself—nuts, go lay an egg. He tried to be cleverly indifferent to those ulcers of thought which, even as he realized he was bidding them a forever farewell, still dogged him.

And then something seemed to take him by one hand and turn him around.

Mag, he thought. Mag, my wife. The fact that he was casting her into the doubtful glitter of widowhood seemed unimportant. It seemed insignificant, or it was not of sufficient importance to consume precious moments of thought right now, that Mag would marry and live with another man. All right. That was human. Who cared about that? She was lovely and young, and she had a right to marry again; he wanted her to. But not to a—well, Steve Mahoney queried, what am I?

Now he had all the excuse needed to deny everything, because he'd never have any of it again to face. His past would be no greater or no less than he'd made it. As far as he could see, to hell with it all.

Except Mag. Naturally Mag could walk on—he willed her to walk on—to greater things, that with him, Steve Ma-

honey, would not have been possible.

He was dead nine minutes.

IT WAS half miracle that he eventually lived, half accident. An old mucker named Ricco spat out his corncob pipe and tossed aside his shovel. No use, somebody said. Hell, brother, I wouldn't touch him. He may not be disconnected from that juice. But old Ricco rooted them aside with one shoulder. He straddled the limp body on his knees while yellow-tinged smoke still boiled from the clothing. Ricco began pumping up and down, as it said to do in the Safety-First magazine, with the butts of his callused hands ramming like clockwork under Steve's shoulder blades. That may have turned the trick.

Maybe it isn't important what did turn the trick. Other things, vague and infinitely more inexplicable than the clumsiness of human hands, may have kicked the spark back inside Steve Mahoney.

It was while the ambulance was screaming toward the hospital, with the white-jacketed attendant blowing cigarette smoke over what he figured was a D.O.A., that Steve bolted from death, cursing and flinging out his arms and kicking with his legs.

He had an odd thought when coherency once more stirred in his brain. At least, for Steve Mahoney it was an odd thought. His thoughts for these past few years, beyond the untroubled thrill of being married to Mag, ran the course of specific and bitterly hated landmarks. Tony Rufo, Gene Paddukis, Barber de Boka, Marchie Dukes—one name of the old gang after another rising out of a mist of crime and gambling and booze and girls.

Sure, the old gang. They'll never allow you to make a clean break. Honesty is for suckers. They'll dupe you into believing you made the stepover. But that's merely the works to make the blow fall heavier when they tighten the screws. You've been away a long time now, Stevie,

old palsy. Without moving his even, white teeth, Tony Rufino could click that one off plenty smooth, giving it the homey twang of a reunion with a rich uncle. Now you can help us. You're not going to take a powder on old pals at a time of need? Listen, I'll say you're not. . . .

But this thought he had now: I was dead. I lived and died in the old world. I served my time. This can be a new world. . . .

No one had to tell Steve Mahoney that he had died. The taste was as strong as vinegar.

Mourning could have been short and sweet.

This thought risen out of the lingering veil of death gave his mind something to chew on as pain began shooting out of numbness, and weak nausea worked at his stomach.

LUCK. A factor. Or call it unguided youth, searching. Luck is a coin with two sides, one good and one bad. Call it a factor, X, that Steve began an involuntary search for from the moment he was old enough to realize his drunken old man was beating hell out of his drunken old woman.

Birthdays. Not so many, but each had been like a stone cast into quiet waters: it went down fast but left a comet's tail.

On his eighteenth birthday he was sitting in a booth in Mike Tadloe's Mission Side Bar. Tough. He had been shaving four years. He was a pretty rugged fellow. It made little difference in the Mission District whether you were large or small, but you had to be rugged. That much Steve learned early.

"Set 'em up eighteen times straight," he told Mike Tadloe. "Today I'm eighteen. Here's your dough. Start setting 'em up."

He looked like future velvet to Tony Rufino. High, intelligent forehead, and well-spaced grey eyes. It was obvious he

could go far. Tony was down from Turk Street looking over some of the young shots. Kids can drive cars and trucks like crazy.

"Hey," Tony said. "What makes for the celebration, kid?"

You don't get a higher score than when Tony Rufino passes out the old clabber-smooth salutation. Steve grinned.

"Here's to *your* luck for me, Mr. Rufino," Steve said. Bottoms up with another shot.

That "Mr. Rufino" stuff warmed the cockles of Tony's heart. He grinned. "You're gonna get rumdum and wind up a fat-headed wino on Third and Mission if you keep this up. Besides, it's bad publicity for your future."

Steve, reflecting with his fuzzy brain, could guess what it was that brought Tony back to the old home section. He could guess it was not social. Not by any shrine of standards familiar to Turk Street, which was where Tony was from. Down here in the Mission District you cut your baby teeth in the filth and the stench and the petty thievery of small-time rackets. You snatched sweets from the bakery wagon and oranges from the fruit peddler, and if he forgot his manners and chased you, God pity his face.

Acid, broken bottles, steel knucks.

If you got to be smart, and your name got passed on up to Turk Street, you went on up to Turk Street, maybe higher. You were the victim of your own special talents from there on out.

Steve finally said, "Well, Mr. Rufino, you got any special reasons I should not wind up a wino?"

"That depends on you," Tony said, and jerked his head.

They went out together.

"You're gonna drive a truck for me," Tony said. "A year of that and you'll learn all the angles. You learn to be scared at the right times, and that's important. The minute you ain't scared at

the right times, you're getting careless, and you're only a meatball. See what I mean, kid?"

Also, Tony pointed out, you didn't bluff. The minute you bluffed, Tony explained, it proved you were playing a weak hand. So the angle was, you never played a weak hand. Which made sense. "Here's a couple C-notes on the cuff. You get some clothes. On Turk Street you dress like class. See, kid, Class, with a big C. Get used to it. And don't let me see you back in the Mission District. You're from Turk Street."

After crumbs, a thick slice of fudge cake.

THE MYSTERIES of this fancier game began dropping in to roost like tired carrier pigeons. Steve could toss a sawbuck to a waiter and have the exclusive privilege of listening to a phony accent while a plank steak was served with little fingers curled just so.

Tony Rufino worked his business with the caution of a debutante smearing paint on a costly antique: long-handled brush, gloved to the shoulders, no unsightly stains on your fingers. And he didn't rush you. Occasionally, if your ears were exceptionally pink after a run, he'd toss you a couple of extra C-notes and you'd toddle off to loll on the beach at Del Mar, maybe, where you could rub elbows with class.

"Let a guy start brooding and he'll sour," Tony used to say. "You got to send him on a trip to live with class a few days. When he gets back he's wanting more dough so he can live like class."

Tony made fewer mistakes in life than the ten-ton mechanical brain at Harvard. He was fifty years old, and thick steaks had rounded out his stomach nicely, and he had no bullet scars on his hide, which is a point in favor of his shrewdness. Only, he made a slight miscalculation in Steve Mahoney.

At the end of a year, time had erased a lot of the glamor for Steve. The factor X was elsewhere. He had driven trucks for Tony Rufino, and in those trucks might be stolen furs, or other kinds of loot. But Steve knew the hard truth: This stuff don't balance out. Besides, he had met Mag, who had freckles on her Irish nose.

"Honey!" Steve yelled one night. He yelled because, enmeshed in a sudden realization, he had to be heard above the clacking roar of the roller-coaster out at the beach. They were taking a curve, and he kept yelling, "I love you, Mag!"

"I love you!" Mag yelled right back and snuggled plenty close for ahead were the bumps.

Steve swelled with the sensation of having completed an eight-horse parlay.

When they staggered, laughing, back on to solid earth, Steve said seriously, "Let's drive out to the point, honey. I got some talking to do."

He drove to a spot overlooking the Golden Gate span. Damp moonlight played lightly upon the harp strings of the bridge. Against the far, rocky shoreline of the gate the incoming tide rushed high, creamed over and curled back musically.

Steve killed the motor and twisted around under the wheel and gently shoved Mag back against the opposite door.

Mag was very beautiful, Steve told himself; but he did not weep about her beauty, because she could have looked like the proverbial fishwife and there was still in Mag, for Steve, that lovely, lovely little *ker-wham* that was silent and shy and, preeminently, intimate.

Steve said, "You got a lot of things to understand about me, baby. And if you can't understand them, then it's no go for us. If you understand them, then I swear I am done with it forever."

She looked across at him. He watched her rub her cheek with a finger. She

touched her hair. She seemed to be waiting critically.

"Just tell her good-bye, Steve." One trouble with Mag was that she had too much confidence in him.

"I'm a truck driver for Tony Rufino," he said. When you mentioned the name, Tony Rufino, it was like mentioning Christmas, because everyone knew. He sat there, impatient and half wary, chewing on his cigarette.

"So quit Tony and get a decent job. Then as soon as you save some money, we'll get married."

Like that. Baby, he wanted to say, you just don't say *bon voyage* to Tony Rufino. In a roundabout way, Steve tried to explain.

"It will be the easiest thing you ever did to quit Tony," Mag said quietly. "The tough part will be to stay quit."

"That's a point." Fear put a foul taste in his mouth. Not like the shock of needed fear when you rammed a high-powered job into second and screamed it up to sixty-five before you kicked it into high. No, Stevie, he told himself. You turn decent and get married and life is all beer and skittles until up pops your illicit past. You slug back, but it's no good.

Tony Rufino? A holy little guy, no fooling. He just smiled benevolently, while his shiny hair gleamed, and his teeth gleamed, and he slapped your shoulder.

"It's okay, Stevie," he said. "Maybe you're out for something different. Maybe you got like a toothache in your conscience. See what I mean? You just take off. Forget everything. Everything!"

Tony meant everything. He meant, first of all, not to get so zealously pious that you figured a finger job would wash you clean of sin.

Steve's nineteenth birthday passed away with a smile from Tony Rufino, and with Steve thanking the Guy Up-

stairs. Maybe everything would still be okay.

THERE were two years working for Western Reserve. No good. Being inside all the time made him squirmy. But with the six hundred he had saved, he married Mag. He landed a job with Marine Construction. Right on up the ladder as if Tony Rufino were a sour note that never happened.

"Well, Steve," Tony said one day across his shoulder. Steve was shoveling his lunch down at a stand across from the yards.

Steve turned. He finally said, "Hello, Tony. How's tricks?"

"Not so hot, Stevie. I got tapped a while back."

"Never bet on platers, Tony," Steve said.

"I bought a two-dollar ticket on you."

Steve laughed. But the apple pie he was swallowing turned to a fish hook. "Okay. Glad to have seen you, Tony. You know how it is when you bet a sawbuck on a plater. Sometimes he don't run. S'long. I'm due on the job in three minutes."

"In two weeks, Steve, we got Western Reserve on our list. We get a tip that Western Reserve delivers a cash payroll to Marine Construction. See what a cinch we got, Stevie? You know Western Reserve inside-out. The grapevine tells me you are a sub-foreman here. That should give you an inside track. You'll be a lot of help. . . ."

Fear was growing ulcer in Steve Mahoney's stomach, and one fist knotted.

"S'long now, Tony. You probably think I'm some other punk."

"I'll be seeing you, Stevie."

* * *

He had a nasty burn on his chin and nose where he had fallen against the bare engine steel when the juice knotted him

up like a pretzel. There were three deep burns on his legs and one on each arm, white to the bone. The rest of his body looked as if brown pennies had suddenly sprouted by the score.

His sluggish thoughts kept informing him: I lived and died in that old world. . . . The stage was set for people to mourn.

When the nurse said, "Mrs. Mahoney is here," he blinked through the two holes in his head bandage. "Do you feel up to seeing anyone?" the nurse added.

It was Steve's first trip to a hospital. He thought they'd given him a helluva ugly nurse.

"Shall I tell her to come in?" the nurse asked.

Steve lay very still. As the awful, bitter memories came back, he considered the many alleys of escape. It remained only for him to choose that way which would hurt Mag the least.

The nurse was terribly efficient, and Steve knew that at his slightest reluctance she would keep even Mag away. Though he felt very well, all things considered, he knew that he could, if he wished, hide behind this accident for quite a while. He had, in fact, many choices. He had eleven thousand volts of electricity to play along with. He could call it shock and not remember anything from the past—and who'd know?

Momentarily, his thoughts were divided.

With one blank look he could wipe Tony's name off the slate; but with that trick of memory went all else, Mag included. He thought of that, and hollowness was a balloon inside him, stealing his breath. Was it better, he wondered, to crush Mag by refusing to admit he knew and loved her, or kill her for certain when Tony, as he would, applied the pressure.

"Okay," he finally muttered through several layers of foil-stained gauze.

It was two A.M. He'd been working overtime on a rush job, and it was 10:18

P.M. when the juice went nuts. For three hours Mag had paced the hospital corridors. She was a regular pest, but none of the staff minded that. You got to wait until he gets out of emergency and comes out from under the anesthesia, they told her. Quit worrying. Your boy friend seems to have the constitution of an elephant.

"He's my husband," Mag corrected them, smiling proudly.

NOW she was going to see her husband for a few minutes. She bit her underlip and squeezed her eyelids tight and said, darn the tears. Okay, now . . .

"Hello," she said.

"Hello, baby."

"Ya big lug. Ya had me scared."

"Ah, go lay an egg."

She held one of his bandaged hands.

His plan for not knowing her receded into nothingness.

"This is merely one of the tricks I play on Tony," he said.

Mag paled. "You know, it's a funny thing, Steve—I've been thinking of Tony, too. Explain what you mean, dear."

Steve tried to laugh. He told her of seeing Tony at the lunch stand a couple of days before. And then he was pretty tired all of a sudden.

"Nuts to Tony Rufino," Mag said.

Steve sighed. Of course, nuts to Tony. All you got to have on your side is a smattering of luck, and people like Tony Rufino go down the garbage chute. You lie in bed for several weeks living the life of Riley, eating fresh eggs straight from the chickens in the back yard of your little four-room nest in South San Francisco—Mag slips these to the nurse, who relays them to the cook. Special guy, you are. And the first thing you know you are on your way home.

The outside looks pretty good, too. It is another season, and the fogs are all wrapped up for the year, and you see peo-

ple gliding lawn mowers across yards and snipping fresh flowers and painting white the rocks edging the lawn.

People visit you. Take one of them: hundred-and-forty-dollar pin-stripe suit, big pearl sulking in the cup of his tie to tell you October is his month. An expensive-appearing fellow in a casual, if foreboding, way. He slips you his engraved card. It says:

Julius T. Grenton
Attorney at Law

"We have arranged accommodations for you at a resort up the Redwood Highway," Mr. Grenton said.

"What's the bite?" Steve asked.

Grenton smiled easily. He shook his head. "We just want you to get plenty of relaxation until you are completely well, Mr. Mahoney."

"I'm as good as I ever was right now. Except the bottoms of my feet are a little tender where the juice punched holes. Are you from the insurance company? I'm not signing anything."

Julius T. Grenton waved his magic wand at all that.

"You don't sign any waivers whatsoever, Mr. Mahoney. All of your expenses will be paid."

Steve said excitedly, "Hey! Gimme some more of that juice, if this is what it gets me. Just make certain that the joint is class as long as someone else is picking up the tab. Hey, now, my wife—she goes along, too, doesn't she?"

Naturally your wife goes along. And did you ask for class? How about it? Right on the bend of the Eel River, just across the golf course from the hotel, practically a short putt from the twelve-dollar blue plate, this big limousine pours you into a mountain cottage.

Everything is there. Fireplace if you should get chilly of an evening. Butane for cooking, if you want to go Bohemian, or just waltz over to the the hotel dining

room and sign the check. The hotel dining room was a modest institution, like the Palace Hotel in the city, with waiters who practically shuddered in horror if you went to such extremes as even tearing a slice of bread in half without their assistance.

"This steak," Steve said, "is like organ music. You just absorb it."

"We certainly can't let ourselves get used to things like this," Mag said.

"These insurance companies try to get you in a good humor before they talk settlement, baby. It's a racket—well, what do you know, Mag. Tony must have pulled that payroll job. Over at the corner table. All by his lonesome."

"Let's get out of here," Mag said.

"Since I was a kid I never knew how to run, baby," Steve said. "It's just a coincidence. Like when Tony started to put the squeeze on me, this accident takes me out of the picture. See, honey? We got luck working on our side."

"He makes my flesh crawl, Steve."

"Ah, go lay an egg and forget Tony." But Steve was worried. He wanted to forget that taint of lawlessness he had stashed in cold storage.

A slender fellow in a pale sport coat and flannel slacks paused at Steve's table.

"Say," he said, "aren't you Steve Mahoney? The fellow who was killed and lived again?"

"I guess that's me," Steve admitted. "Why?"

"I'm a reporter for the *Star-Bulletin*. Just picking up news from the guests."

"Okay," Steve said. "You guys have to eat. Shoot."

"A short Sunday feature, maybe, Mr. Mahoney. Now, there's little need asking if you are enjoying it here." He scribbled on a piece of paper he had extracted from the inside pocket of his coat. "Now—shall I quote you as saying you wish to thank Mr. Tony Rufino for having you sent up here to convalesce, all

expenses paid? My paper would like—"

"What?" Steve snarled. He dropped his fork. He turned and stared at Tony. Tony's smile was as rare as the seven-dollar New York cut. "And get out of here before I kill you, punk!"

"Oh, well—news is news."

"Before I break your neck, punk! You publish that in your stinking rag and your boss will have to find himself another rat. You'll wake up in a marble orchard under a dollar's worth of carnations."

The suave waiter emptying the ashtray at Steve's elbow arched his eyebrows, forgot to replace the ashtray, and hurried away with it in his fingers.

"Honey," Mag said, "let's get out of here."

Steve turned to glare at Tony. Tony lifted a slab of drippy New York cut, saluted with it, and stuffed it in his mouth.

"We catch the next bus south, honey," Steve said. He motioned to the waiter. "Give us our bill," he said. "In fact, give us our bill for the entire week we've been here."

The waiter said quietly, "I'm sorry, sir. You'll have to see the manager."

"But you owe nothing . . ." the manager said.

Don't I though, Steve thought. I owe plenty. I paid up once, because I died. When you die, you pay all debts. You leave your wife a widow. Your friends tell each other what a swell bird you were, and they sure do miss old Stevie, and then Jimmie or Jack or Bill walks into the picture and you are just a vague old shadow in the past. And your enemies forget you even faster than that, because if they were afraid of you, their worrying days are done.

STEVE and Mag hurried to their cotage. They began cramming suitcases full. At midnight there was a southbound bus due.

"I thought I had my automatic along," Steve said as he rummaged through the dresser.

"You probably forgot it, dear," Mag said.

"No. I'm nearly sure I had it along."

She stood up straight and stared at him. "Steve, you're not figuring on using that gun on Tony?"

"I'm not that stupid, honey. But I thought I put it in my suitcase."

"You'll probably find it at home, Steve."

* * *

Tony Rufino grinned at Steve the next evening.

"You get the hell outa here, Tony," Steve said.

Tony gave a hurt frown. "You don't understand me, Steve. Always I try to help you. And what do I get? A kick in the puss for my troubles."

"Get away from my house, Tony, and forget the address. I don't need your help. And I want to know how much that trip cost you. I'm paying you back. I'd never have gone in the first place except I figured it was the insurance company sending me up."

Tony shrugged. "That's all sewed up, Steve. The check is paid. You see, Steve, when we pull this payroll job, as soon as you get back to work, that makes us even."

"You're up a blind alley this time, Tony. I paid my freight while I was working for you. I don't owe you a thing."

"Of course not. You owe me nothing." Tony licked his lips. "But I just want to help you cover that killing up at the resort."

"Come again, Tony?"

"The fellow you threatened to kill, Steve. It's one of those things you could call a nasty coincidence, maybe. I was

out getting some fresh air early the next morning. I was walking up in the hills. Guess who I found with a hole in his head, and guess whose gun was lying there by him." Tony shook his head. "But I keep secrets like a clam, Stevie, old friend. I doubt if he'll ever be found. I buried him, along with your gun, naturally."

"Okay, Tony. Who was that punk? He said he was a reporter for the *Star-Bulletin*. Who was he?"

Tony shrugged. "It was just one of my little jokes, Steve. I like to be original. I knew you would be happy indeed when you learned that your old pal had planned a surprise trip for you. So I had Hymie give you the line about being a reporter."

"Well," Steve said, "it sure was original, Tony. Hymie was one of your mob and it turned out he was a meatball for some reason or other, so you figure it this way: Why let a punk die unless he can do you a good turn?"

"Maybe you shoulda seen things my way from the start," Tony said.

"As of right now, my friend, this is exactly how I see things." Steve let go with a piledriver left. Tony stood limp as a rag for a moment, then blood squirted out of his mouth and he backflipped off Steve's porch.

Steve wasn't standing there when Tony's rear made a wide dent in the lawn. He slammed the door behind him and flopped in a chair and laid his forehead in his palms. In a few moments he heard a car roar away.

Mag came in the room. She got a package of smokes and lit one and stuck it between his fingers. He was surprised to find the cigarette there.

"Thanks, baby."

"Want me to pour you a drink?"

"No, thanks."

"I heard what Tony said."

He smiled up at her. "Cute little cen-

tipede, Tony is. He rubbed out one of his rats and tucked him away for future velvet. Tony always did like future velvet to draw on when the need arose."

Her voice choked back a frantic impulse. "I think it was one of Tony's bluffs, Steve."

He shook his head. "No. Tony wasn't bluffing."

There was a silence that lasted a long time. Then Mag started to talk.

He cut her off sharply. "You just married the wrong guy, Mag. You were a widow once for nine minutes, I am told—"

Her voice was frantic. "No, Steve, no. Listen—let's get away from here. We can go—"

"I don't want us to leave here," he said quietly. "We got a cute little bungalow. It's gonna take us twenty years to pay for it." His mind fought for quiet control.

"Don't talk like that, Steve. Please! I tell you Tony is just bluffing."

He said, "Tony doesn't bluff. Hymie is like money in the bank to Tony." He got up and grabbed his coat and hat.

"Don't go out, Steve!"

"Good-bye, my sweet," he said. In twenty minutes he was turning off Market Street toward Turk. He waited for a traffic light to change. If I had died, Mag would have been a widow now for a long, long time anyway. The light changed and he gunned his coupe. He eased into a parking place and cramped his wheels against the curb.

I was dead once, anyway, and as things stood people had to get accustomed to that fact.

A short time of mourning. A fine likeness of him enlarged and placed on the mantel until Johnny or Mac or Joe Whoosiss mosed up one day to fill in.

A man is scared of death. Maybe he bridles that fear to a certain extent. But it's like starting out to swim the Pacific Ocean: you practically shake yourself out of your pants thinking of it. But once

the deed has been engineered, it's simply peanuts.

HE FOUND the address on Turk Street. It was a white-brick hotel. He got in the elevator and punched the button labeled 5. Getting out, he walked straight down the carpeted hallway and rapped on Tony's door. He heard a check-chain rattle. Then the door cracked, and a thin face peered out. Then the door closed. Then it opened wide.

"Come in, Steve," Tony said. He grinned and the lump on his cheek pouched out a little farther. In the half darkness of the room Tony's eyes seemed like rusty rivets lying back in a chipped-out core of greasy metal. "You thought things over, Steve? Well, bygones is bygones."

"Sure," Steve said. He rubbed the skinned knuckles of his left fist. "I was just thinking, Tony . . ." He glanced around the room. There was only one man there. Marchie Dukes.

"Marchie will stay," Tony told Steve.

He didn't want Marchie to stay, but there wasn't much he could do about that. "Okay, Tony."

Tony grinned. "You were going to say . . ."

"I was going to say you got yourself in a jam, Tony. Perhaps I can help you out of it."

Tony kept grinning, but there was a nervous scowl fighting for first place on his face. "If you came up here to talk Western Reserve, okay, Steve. Otherwise you are wasting your time. Poor Hymie—"

"I was getting around to Hymie, Tony. That's what I am going to talk about. You remember how it rained off and on while we were up at the resort?"

"What's rain got to do with Western Reserve?"

Steve took a chair and leaned back in it very slowly. When he settled back, his body was like a trigger, ready to spring.

"The rain has got nothing to do with Western Reserve unless they loan money on crops, Tony. But I was just thinking. Listen. Suppose a couple men walked up into the hills on a trail. The ground was rain-soaked, soft. Say they walked quite a ways, even. And then one of them plugs the other, and buries him so no one will

G-HEAT by Wallace Umphrey

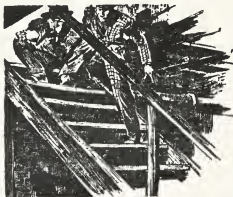
STARTLING FEDERAL NOVEL

A luscious lure led FBI-man Peter Hudson to a murder parley where he met the killer king of the modern Middle Ages.

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find the body. That soft ground has got the guy nailed, Tony."

Tony said, "I guess I never rated you quite right, Steve. Go ahead."

Steve lit a smoke. He took three puffs and tamped the cigarette out in a tray. From one eye corner he saw Marchie inching behind him.

Steve grinned. "And so those hick cops, all they got to do is make plaster casts of those footprints, Tony. And one of them is the stiff and one is the murderer."

Tony looked past Steve, at Marchie. "You got to give this fellow a better grade in your book, Marchie." He looked back to Steve. "I guess that makes you a pigeon, Steve."

Steve took that in slowly, but he understood. He said slowly, "Sure. Because the cops are gonna let loose the bloodhounds, Tony. So you know what pigeons do to people, Tony. They—" He could conceal his movements no longer.

As he hurled himself twisting out of the chair, he saw the flash of steel popping out of Marchie's pocket. But he was already against Tony, slugging with both fists. Tony squirmed half away from him, and the room exploded in sound. He grabbed at Tony's hand as it emerged with a gun. Steve slammed in a gut-hook just as Tony fired.

Behind him, Steve heard Marchie making strange noises. He heard Marchie hit the floor; then Marchie's gun thumped across the rug. Tony's gun exploded in his face, and something sounded like a troupe of animals breaking down the hotel.

"TAKE a slug of this," someone said.

Steve opened his eyes. "Where'd you guys come from?"

"Oh," said Lieutenant McQuire, "we get around."

"Where is Tony?"

"He's being booked."

"Marchie?"

"I guess it was Tony's gun that killed Marchie. I guess we might charge Tony with manslaughter."

Steve laughed softly and sat up. "Tony never believed in bluffing, so I guess he couldn't recognize one." He told them about Hymie. "What a sucker—falling for that one about tracking him in the soft dirt and making plaster casts. . . ."

McQuire spun away. "Casey, get the sheriff of Mendocino County on the phone. Tell him exactly what Steve just told me. Tell him to get the hell out there with his kit and find those footprints. Manslaughter, he says!"

"Wait a minute," Steve said. "You don't understand. I was just bluffing Tony."

"You were laying it out for us, Steve," McQuire said. "We had a tail on Tony and Hymie when they went up there. Tony came back alone. It's not going to be too easy to pin Marchie's death on Tony. He'll swear you came up here and attacked them and in the scuffle Marchie was killed. But this other! Man-oh-man—how long does it take to get the goods on a guy like Tony Rufino?"

Steve again struggled with his thoughts. "But how in hell did you birds get the tip to bust in here."

McQuire looked at him in surprise. "You dope. Your wife. She hooked a cab from South San Francisco and came screaming into headquarters."

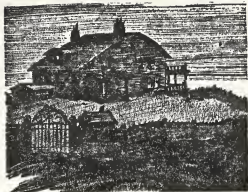
Steve grinned. "Mag! Where is she?"

"She's waiting downstairs now."

Steve heard her voice saying, "But I tell you I'm his wife!"

"Let her in!" Steve yelled. He started to say "Honey" but he choked up, and he tried it again and she rushed through the door toward him, and then he thought, nuts, McQuire, go lay an egg while I kiss my wife.

THE SPELL OF REUBEN ROCK



*In the Bulls Creek District of Pennsylvania, they
know what to do when the dead return to haunt
the living. . . .*

AROUND the mountainous Bulls Creek district in Pennsylvania, things are better now. Reuben Rock is resting peacefully, and his widow, Rosella Rock, is recovering as well as can be expected from the shock of his death.

But first they had to dig up Reuben Rock from his grave, strip off the Army uniform he had once worn so proudly, and burn it. That was the only way to get the hex off it. And as long as there was any hex around, Rosella would just keep pinning away.

A strange man, evidently, this Reuben Rock, according to his in-laws. A veteran of World War II, he'd died of tuberculosis. But before that . . .

"Reuben was saved at the end," his mother-in-law, Mrs. Arthur Dively, said. "But he still had strange books and things in his house. Rosella was just crazy to be with him. She would go to him at any time. . . ."

A strange man, Reuben Rock. For, according to Mrs. Dively, after his death the "restless spirit" of Reuben Rock returned to torment his wife. She could not eat or sleep, and slowly she wasted away.

The Divelys decided that Reuben had

By
BUDD HOWARD

put a charm on Rosella's picture. So they burned the picture.

But the ghost of Reuben Rock still lingered in the house.

Then it was that they decided that Reuben Rock's uniform—the one in which he had been buried—had to be burned. For the uniform had been his dearest possession, and he had given it to his wife Rosella.

So on February 22, this year, with the permission of Bedford County officials, the grave of Reuben Rock was opened and the body exhumed.

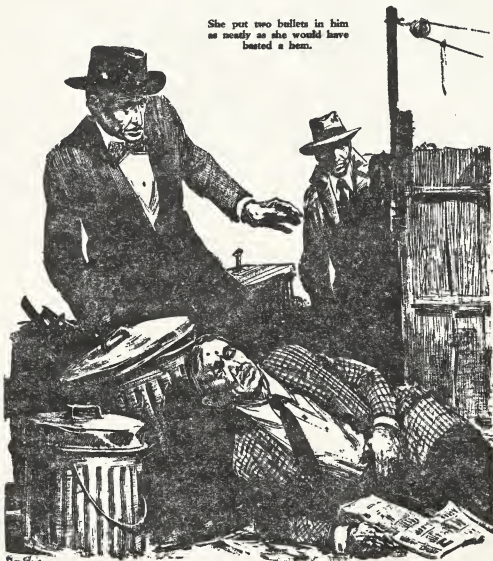
They took the uniform off the body, soaked it in gasoline, and burned it. To ward off evil spirits, they sprinkled the body with salt and wrapped it in a clean white sheet. Then once again Reuben Rock was placed in his grave. This time, it was hoped, for the last time.

At last report, Rosella Rock was recovering from the "spell" placed on her by her dead husband.

• ANY CORPSE

*The coroner had a field day when Benny Axt, murder's
own little moron, put the screws to the millionaire
Winthrop brothers . . . who would match Benny—
corpse for corpse—any red day in the week!*

She put two bullets in him
as neatly as she would have
bested a hen.



IN A STORM •

Bizarre Mystery Novel

By LARRY HOLDEN

CHAPTER ONE

Murderous Moron



I WALKED into the office humming and closed the door with a cheerful bang. Miss Singleton raised her head and looked at me with her glasses glinting coldly.

"Well, Mr. Public Defender," she said tartly, "I hope you're proud of yourself this morning!"

Whenever Miss Singleton calls me Mr. Public Defender, I shorten sail immediately because it means the hurricane flags are flying.

"Not proud," I said cautiously. "Just earnest. I feel very earnest today. Why?"

She handed me the morning *News* as if she were serving a warrant. "Read that!" She sounded briskly and grimly satisfied. "One of your lily-white protégés seems to have reverted to type. Ha!" She loved to rub it in.

I gave her a sour glance and looked down at the newspaper.

ESCAPES N. J. PRISON; SLUGS, KILLS DRIVER

TRENTON (AP)—In a daring dash for freedom this morning, Benjamin Axt, 42, after serving only two weeks of a one-year sentence for petty larceny, quietly slugged the driver of the garbage removal truck and escaped while the guards, it seemed, peacefully slept at their posts.

The truck was found abandoned four hours later on Route 33, near Lakehurst, in Ocean County. The driver, Louis Saliński, 34, was rushed, unconscious, to the

Lakehurst General Hospital where he died from a fractured skull.

Warden W. E. Undercliff . . .

I felt a little sick. I had defended Benny Axt, a small, brown, laughing man, harmless, it had seemed to me, except for a kind of pixyish inability to keep his hands out of other people's pockets.

"That," said Miss Singleton waspishly, "is what comes of helping criminals to escape their just desserts."

Benny Axt, when I defended him, had stolen a wallet with seven dollars in it. What did she want him to get, the chair? Some day she was going to go too far. Some day she was going to push me a little too hard, and I'd answer her back, or something.

"Have you typed the Collins complaint?" I asked shortly.

"It's on your desk, Mr. Foran."

"Thank you."

I STAMPED into the office marked Private, if anything could be private under Miss Singleton's probing and clinical eye. I lit a cigarette and set myself to reread the Collins complaint, but I couldn't get my mind off Benny Axt.

It was such a senseless jail break. He had been given only one short year. He'd been in the clink before. He could serve a year standing on his head and not even get a rush of blood. You don't kill people and break jail just because you're going to miss one Thanksgiving dinner on the outside. It just didn't make sense.

I smoked about a half-inch of the cigarette, ground it out and lit another. I was in no way to blame. Just because when things get slack I go down to the courthouse and act for some poor devil who can't afford a lawyer, didn't mean that I was responsible for Benny Axt's temporary and murderous insanity. Sure, I'd gotten him off lightly. He was guilty, but he was so damned engaging that, pick-pocket or no pick-pocket, you just couldn't

help liking him. He was a good Joe.

Even when he was sentenced and the judge gave him a year and a little lecture, Benny said solemnly:

"It's been a lesson to me, Your Honor. When that guy grabbed me with my hand in his pocket, it felt as if he wanted to break it off and take it home to the kiddies. No more pocketpicking for me. It's too dangerous."

Yet he had killed a man, breaking out. I couldn't believe it. There was no point.

I wrestled for fifteen minutes with the dry, legal rhetoric of the Collins complaint, but I might just as well have tried to make sense out of fly tracks. I slipped it into the top drawer of my desk and reached for the phone and called police headquarters.

I got Captain Hemstead. "Hi, shyster," he said. "Who're you trying to spring today?"

I wasn't in any mood to swap even good-humored insults with him. "This story about Benny Axt, Dave. Is that the McCoy? Did he really knock off that truck driver?"

"Looks like it, Roy. Say, you defended Axt, didn't you?"

"If you can call it that."

"Did he give you any kind of line on himself—where he might hole up or something? This is murder, kid, so don't hold out on me."

It might have been my state of mind, but I felt a hint of menace in his heavy voice.

"Dave," I said unhappily, "I know less about him than you do. When Judge Goldsmith appointed me counsel, I thought Axt just an amusing little pick-pocket. Even Sourpuss Goldsmith got a laugh out of him."

"Yeah? I'll bet His Honor's still laughing. I'll bet he laughed even harder when he read the paper this morning. You got a funny slant on the law, Foran, and you're asking for trouble unless you get yourself

unkinked. Call me up some time when you have some more laughs, like mugging or armed robbery!"

He hung up. It sounded as if he'd done it with a sledge hammer.

I started to call him back to straighten him out, but I let the receiver fall back into its cradle. Let him cool off first. He was a cop, and he had to be serious about violations of the law. He wouldn't last long if he developed a sense of humor and laughed it off every time he caught somebody with a gun in somebody's else back.

But in one thing, Hemstead was right. There's nothing funny about a killer. Nothing. Nothing whatever.

I went through the Collins complaint, dictated a few threatening letters, and around one-thirty I went to lunch. After lunch I went to a ball game. It was the farthest thing from Benny Axt and the legal world that I could think of. I had dinner and I went to a movie. I got home about ten-forty-five. I was as wide awake as a cat in a dog pound, so I turned on the radio and sat back to drink two quarts of beer, which never fails to put me to sleep. The combination of radio and beer, I mean. The last thing I remember before I peacefully folded my eyes was the comedian desperately trying to raise a laugh by insulting himself. It was pathetic, but a perfect soporific.

I AWOKE with a jerk, blinked into a blazing sun, then squeezed my eyelids together again.

"Hello, pally. Remember me?" a voice chuckled.

It wasn't the sun; it was a flashlight, and he held it about a foot from my face. It had a lens the size of a saucer, and the light was so intense that even my glued eyelids didn't help. I put out my hands—and got rapped across the knuckles by something that felt like a sap.

"Not with the hands, pally. Sit tight and be right." He laughed.

"Benny Axt," I said slowly.

"Right. Little Benny in person. I never forget a friend, pally, and I knew you'd remember me. You're okay, pally, and that's why I come to you. I got a pitch that's strictly legit, and I'm cutting you in."

"Not me, Benny. You're too hot to handle."

"Forget it, will you, pally?" he said uneasily. "Just let me give you the pitch . . ."

"I can't defend you this time, Benny. That was murder."

"I said forget it!" he said sharply. Then, apologetically, "I didn't mean to cool the guy, honest I didn't, Mr. Foran. He must of had an extra thin head or something. I didn't hit him hard enough to bust a grape. Aw, wipe off that Friday face, will you, pally? Lemme explain, and you'll see why I just had to bust out of that bandbox."

I lifted my hand against the light and got another rap.

He snarled, "Not with the hands, pally. I'd hate to cool a right guy like you just because he made a mistake. Let's keep it friendly."

My face prickled with cold sweat. Captain Hemstead was right. There was nothing funny about Benny Axt. I kept my hands quiet, remembering Louis Salinski, the truck driver with the thin head. My head might be thin, too.

"What's on your mind, Benny?" I asked wearily.

He chuckled again. "When we get finished, pally," he gloated, "you'll be using C-notes to light you C-gars," he laughed happily. "Get it, pally? C-notes, C-gars. I'm always good for a laugh. Right? But let's get down to business. Ever hear of that wealthy millionaire named Winthrop, hey?"

"Yes. I've heard of him. He's dead."

"Would I be here if he wasn't dead? Of course he's dead. Died without a will,

too, didn't he? This thing was missing."

"That's right. The estate's still tied up."

I squeezed my eyes shut. It was no good trying to turn my head away from the agonizing glare, for he followed me with the light. I was almost as helpless as if I were handcuffed.

"How long will it be tied up?" Benny asked eagerly. "A couple weeks yet?"

"A couple years, is more like it."

"A couple years! You mean, I didn't have to bust out of jail or nothing?"

I had a sense of foreboding, for an icy calm settled over me and I asked evenly, "What's the Winthrop estate to you, Benny?"

"To me? That ain't the point. What'm I to it? *That's* the question. Pally," he whispered, "I'm the guy that's got old man Winthrop's will, writ down in his own writing. Whatta you think of that!"

I didn't have to think. I knew. On the death of a man with as many millions as Winthrop had, a will clearly stating his wishes would clear up in two minutes what would take the courts two years to decide. There were millions in bonds, stocks, industry and other enterprises that would take Chancery years to tabulate.

And Benny Axt, the murderous moron, had the will! No wonder he had broken out of jail.

"For the love of Pete, Benny," I gasped, "where'd you get it?"

"I ain't no hero," he said frankly. "It was an accident. I had the Winthrop box all cased, and this night I charged it. All by myself, see? Lifting hides is just a kind of hobby with me. You make more on inside work. So there I was, with the safe open, and before I know what happens, the lights go on and there in the door stands this silver-haired old john. I thought that was it, because I never carry a torch. I flang up my arm. He takes two steps and falls flat on his puss. I grab up a fat-looking box from the safe and

scram. The next day I see in the papers that old man Winthrop drops dead from his heart. Then I find his will in the box, and am I sitting pretty! Everybody knows the old goat hates both his sons, and more'n maybe is going to leave the old roll to the SPCA. So I got something to sell, see? There are two guys that won't want to see that will get published around, because maybe if it does, the old moola goes to the cats and dogs and they get none. What a setup! Then," he said in disgust, "I have to get caught in a pin-money rap. What a break. Phooey."

"BENNY," I whispered, "don't you realize that you can be charged with the murder of Winthrop?"

"Me? Are you nuts? I never laid a finger on him."

"None the less, you caused his death while robbing his house, and that's murder."

"Pally," he said uneasily, "why don't you pull in your barber pole? Up till now I thought you was square. I wouldn't of cut you in otherwise. All you gotta do is listen."

I listened, but my mind kept busily turning, trying to figure a way to get this lethal moron back in jail where he belonged.

"Now here's the pitch, pally," he said earnestly. "These two sons of Winthrop, Jonathan and Curtis, each got the same proposition tonight. I put it in their mailbox myself. I didn't send it through the post office. They can't get me on that one. I said I wanted a hundred thousand bucks apiece from them, or two hundred thousand from either one, get it? When they come through they can have the will, and the cats and dogs can go hungry. But if they don't come through I'm sending the will to the *News*. I told them to deal with you. You're an honest john with a rep, so they'll deal. I'm cutting you in for fifty G's. Okay, hey, pally?"

All I could say was, "My God!"

He misunderstood. "Yeah, big stuff, hey?" he chuckled. "Didn't I say you'd be lighting your C-gars with C-notes?"

"No!" I said. "No!"

"No, hell! You're in on it if you like it or not. You're handling it, pally, and I'll call you on the phone to tell you where to deliver the dough. And if you try turning me in," his voice thinned, "I'll yell double-cross and say you've got the will."

"You'll burn, Benny. You'll burn on two counts."

"And you'll do more than burn, pally. You might be in the clear with the law if you turn me in, but there's more than law in this. There are two guys with their hands practically on a sackful of millions. *They* won't believe you don't have the will. Guys have been bumped off for fifty bucks. Where do you think you'll stand with millions in the pot? You'll not only burn, you'll fry, you'll sizzle, you'll curl up like a cinder. Think it over, friend. You're on the coals, and there's no place to jump!"

I lunged at him. I flung up my arm and struck at the flashlight. I felt my knuckles strike the metal barrel and my outstretched fingers tear into a pocket—and the light exploded into a million scintillating meteors and I plunged into the darkness of interstellar space. It was cold, cold, and of a darkness I had never imagined.

CHAPTER TWO

Blood Brothers

IT WASN'T a gnome standing beside the waterfall—it was Captain Hemstead, and I was under the shower in my own bathroom. I was stark naked and a vise-handed detective with a face like a chopping block was holding me by the upper arm. His digging fingers hurt clear up to the back of my neck.

"Dry him off," said Hemstead grimly. "He's sober. Bring him into the other room." He gave me a look of blazing hatred and stamped through the doorway.

The detective hauled me out of the shower. I angrily pulled away from his crunching fingers.

"I'll dry myself," I snarled.

"Yeah? Okay. Go ahead."

He slapped the wet towel across my face and grinned as I blinked the stinging tears from my eyes.

"I'll remember that," I said.

He yawned. "Dry it off," he said. "It's dripping."

I dried my face and hands, tied the towel around my waist and went after Hemstead in the living room. He was standing with his back to the fireplace, his hands clasped behind him. His mouth was as thin as a knife slit in a rump of veal. He didn't give me time to open my mouth.

"Benny Axt was here tonight," he barked. "What'd he want? Where is he? Where'd he hole up? How much did he give you?"

I just held on to the towel and gaped at him. I felt like one of those dreams in which you're caught naked on the corner of Broad and Market.

"Out with it, shyster," he said nastily. "I thought there was something funny going on when you called me this morning, so I put a tail on you. And sure enough, little Benny turned up. Now give, brother."

My mind was as sluggish as a Model-A on a wintry morning. I'd been hit too hard, too often and too recently. "Give?" I said. "Give?"

"Yeah, give. Where's his hole? He ran straight to you, and that means something. Give!"

"I didn't ask him to come here," I sparred.

"No? All right. And you didn't ask him to put a bullet in Gantner either. But

he did, on both counts. I want to hear it. *Give!*"

I could have given. I could have given him the whole story—but I didn't. What I wanted more desperately than anything else was time. Time to get in touch with Benny Axt again, time to get that will away from him. I'd never be in the clear again unless I did.

"I'll give," I said slowly. "Benny was here tonight. I was asleep in the chair in front of the radio, and he woke me up. He wanted me to take his case. I told him to go to hell and he knocked me out. What's wrong with that?"

"Not a thing, Foran. Not a thing. You told him to go to hell, and he knocked you out. Very natural. You didn't happen to have a drink together, did you? Just for old times' sake? You smelled like ten nights in a barroom when we picked you up. You didn't just happen to fall out of the chair, did you? You told me yourself that Benny Axt was too amusing to hit anybody. You weren't celebrating just a little, were you?"

"Celebrating what?"

"A nice, fat fee, for instance. Any guy that can wander down to the courthouse and take the free cases, a guy like that ain't doing so good. A guy like that wouldn't need to think twice about promoting a case. But you, you turned one down. Now I ask you!"

He gave me the bare bones of a grin, all teeth and no mirth, and rubbed the side of his nose with his forefinger, waiting. Cynical, hostile, jeering.

The wooden-faced detective gave my towel a twitch and it fell to the floor around my feet. Nobody can stand naked in the midst of those who are clothed and still be composed. But I was made. I let the towel lie there.

"Did you find any money on me?" I demanded frostily. "Naturally you went through my pockets. And through the apartment. Did you find this fat fee? And

what shyster would take a case like this without cash on the barrelhead? Go ahead, Hemstead, produce this non-existent cash and I'll produce a non-existent confession."

HEMPSTEAD'S square-nailed fingers curled into his palms and his eyes grew hot. The detective behind me let out a harsh breath, and Hemstead chopped with his hand, as if in warning. Hemstead's face went wooden.

"That story might hold up in front of the bar association," he said tonelessly to me. "But maybe there'll be another one, before I get finished. And I'm not finished, shyster. Don't ever believe that I'm finished with you. Come on, Murph."

He plodded out of the apartment. The detective, Murphy, turned in the doorway and spat deliberately, slowly and insultingly in the middle of the rug.

"Good-night, Mr. Foran," he said politely. "Sleep well."

I didn't start shaking until he had closed the door. One more visit from Benny Axt and I was sunk. Oh, Miss Singleton, I said fervently, how well you knew!

I slept fine. I slept just dandy. Twice I closed my eyes for three minutes at a stretch. The rest of the time I just lay there and counted goats jumping over a barred window, and all the goats wore my face. I couldn't have had a better time if I'd been tied hand and foot in the bottom of a snake pit.

At five-thirty A.M. I got up from my drenched mattress and took a cold shower. There was a little yellow-and-blue bruise over my left eye, no larger than a quarter, but judging from the way my head ached, you'd have thought Benny Axt had hit me with a cleaver.

At eight-ten the doorbell buzzed like a pocketful of thwarted bees. It was the apartment door, not the downstairs door. I thought it was the police again, and I

opened it fast with my jaw squared.

He wasn't the police. He looked like a bleached Basil Rathbone, an albino hawk. He was dressed in a double-breasted Glen plaid, tailored by an artist, for you could barely notice the hump on his left shoulder, and, anyway, he held his right shoulder higher to conceal it.

He held his dark grey Homburg in his hand and spread his bloodless lips back from his white, even teeth. His hair was white and silky, he had no eyebrows, and his eyes were fiercely amber, predatory and sharp.

"Mr. Foran?" he purred, smiling. "My name is Winthrop. Curtis Winthrop. You probably weren't expecting me so early, but it's my motto that the early worm escapes the bird. I believe—" he went by me and into the living room—"we have some business to discuss."

His smile sliced at me as he carefully placed his Homburg on the coffee table and seated himself on the sofa. It was a chilling smile. Compared to his hawk-like, aristocratic bearing, I felt lumpish and thick-witted. I put my back against the wall by the door.

"I know what you're here for, Mr. Winthrop," I said, "and I'm not having anything to do with it."

"No?" he said. He smiled and smiled. He reached into the inner pocket of his faultless jacket and drew out an envelope. From the envelope he took a note and two photographs. He spread them on the coffee table, still smiling. He raised his eyebrows. "My brother hasn't been here before me, has he?" he asked.

"No. Should he have been?"

He shrugged. "He's probably sleeping off a hangover. However, as long as he hasn't been here, Mr. Foran, suppose we dispose of the business? I am prepared to offer two hundred thousand dollars for the alleged holographic will of my late father. It is undoubtedly a forgery, but it is worth that amount to be rid of the nuisance."

Still smiling, he spread a check on top of the photographs.

Even from where I stood, I could see that the check was certified. I wasn't tempted, but I felt my palms go damp, for here was confirmation that Benny Axt's story hadn't been a pipe dream. There on my coffee table was a check worth two hundred thousand dollars. And the man meant it.

I stammered, "M-may I see those photographs?"

"Certainly."

HE HELD them out to me, and I snatched them from his fingers. There were two. One showed the top of a sheet of paper laid on a table.

February 14, 1948

I, Esau Winthrop, being of sound mind, do hereby dispose of my property, real and otherwise, as follows:

From that point, the photograph had been effaced with grey lines. The second photograph showed the bottom of another sheet of paper.

Signed:
Esau Winthrop
Witnessed:
Ellen Branigan
Joseph Branigan

"Someone," said Curtis Winthrop languidly, "was very clever. Ellen and Joseph Branigan are still in my employ. They recall witnessing several documents for my father, but I hardly think it possible that the old man would not have consulted his attorney for a document so important as his will. Don't you agree, Mr. Foran?"

"I don't know, Mr. Winthrop," I said, handing him back the photographs. "As I said before, I have nothing to do with this business. My name was used without my permission. If you are going to deal with anyone you'll have to deal with the man who has the will."

He rolled his eyes. "A stuffed shirt! All right, Mr. Foran, we'll pretend you do not have the will," he waved a bony, sharp-fingered hand. "Would you be so kind as to forward my check to the gentleman who *does* have the will?"

I said, "No. I don't want anything to do with it."

He pursed his lips thoughtfully and touched the check with a pointed forefinger. Then he reached into his pocket and drew out an envelope. From the envelope he took ten crisp thousand-dollar bills. He laid them carefully on the table.

"I'm serious, Mr. Foran," he said, his voice suddenly sharp. "If we called this ten thousand dollars your commission, would you then forward my check to the gentleman who has the will?" He didn't pretend any longer that the will was a forgery. "Would you, Mr. Foran?" He leaned toward me, as intent as a cat at a mousehole. "Would you?"

My tongue felt three fingers thick. "No. I don't want any part of it."

He sighed, but his lean hands showed white at the knuckles. "I was afraid of a holdup," he murmured. "But," that smile glinted again, "I did not come unprepared. I'll raise the ante. Fifty thousand dollars for you in cash, Mr. Foran. Fifty thousand dollars, about which you do not have to say a word to your partner. Fifty thousand dollars, Mr. Foran!"

I don't know how I said it, but I did. I said, "No, no, no!" It didn't even sound like my own voice. It sounded like something that had been scraped off a rusty hinge with a dull file. "No!"

He said slowly, "I don't like the word 'no,' Mr. Foran. And don't . . ."

The doorbell buzzed again, the downstairs door this time.

I said, "Excuse me," and went into the kitchen to press the release button. When I came back, he had gathered all his papers together and was putting them back into his pocket. His smile was gone. Two

minutes later a heavy fist hammered on the apartment door.

"The police," I said drily to Curtis Winthrop. "You can take those things out of your pocket again and tell them what I told you."

He looked amused. "No. Not the police, Mr. Foran. I think not. No. Answer the door."

I felt his eyes between my shoulder blades as I crossed the room. I unlocked the door, and it was flung back, hurling me against the wall. A blond giant stormed into the room, roaring, but on seeing Curtis Winthrop calmly seated on the sofa, he stopped short. His head turned and his eyes uncertainly sought mine.

"Come in, Brother Jonathan," said Curtis mockingly, "Come in. Or are you in?"

JONATHAN'S eyes were blood-shot and hung with oyster-grey crescents. His hair looked as if it had been inhabited by field mice. He licked his thick, brutal lips.

He said thickly, "I might have known the rat would be out when the cheese was cut."

"You've cut yourself?" Curtis raised what would have been an eyebrow. "Gorgonzola, no doubt."

Jonathan whirled on me. "What'd he offer you?" he demanded. "If it's a check, forget it. He's broke. I'll give you two hundred thousand cash for that will and no questions asked. Take it or leave it."

Curtis laid his careful hands on his thigh and laughed softly. "Mr. Foran is not a squirrel," he murmured. "He is not interested in peanuts. That two hundred thousand was just a come-on. So, brother mine, you will have to come again. I offered him two hundred and fifty thousand. Do you want to bid against me?"

"Sixty," snarled Jonathan.

"Sixty? Seventy, Mr. Foran."

"Eighty."

"Ninety."

"Three hundred thousand—cash!"

"Aren't you pressing your credit just a little, Jonathan? Three hundred and ten, Mr. Foran. And I have the cash to back it up. If my brother offers three hundred and twenty, make him show it first."

Jonathan's forehead was pebbled with sweat. He ran the back of his hand across his mouth and turned on his brother. "You know damn well," he panted, "the old man liked me better than he did you. You know damn well he left the money to me. That's the reason you're bidding me up. He didn't leave you a cent. Not a damn cent!"

"On the contrary!" Curtis snapped. "You never had a dollar you didn't gamble away. How deeply are you in debt to that hoodlum, Lace Malone, the one who runs the Black and White Club? Is it his money you're bidding with? The old man knew you were irresponsible, and he wouldn't have left you a cigar coupon, unless he was in his dotage, and there was nothing senile about the old man!"

They faced one another across the coffee table, Jonathan all thick-muscled and heavy, like a mastiff, Curtis sleek and snarling, a cat, dangerous, composed, lithe. It was Jonathan whose eyes first fell away from that duel. He turned back to me.

"Three hundred and fifty thousand dollars," he said with effort. "And you'd better take it or you'll be sorry."

Curtis murmured, "Three hundred and sixty," and smiled.

I have a slow temper, but it had been rising steadily. Within twenty-four hours I had been taken for an accomplice, a crook and a blackmailer; I had been threatened, I had been hit over the head and I faced disbarment. Now these two jackals were bickering in big money, trying to buy my honesty.

Something prickled over my scalp and I said savagely, "Get out of here! Get out

of here, both of you! I told you in the beginning I didn't have anything to do with this rotten scheme. Now, get out!"

There was an unbelieving silence; then Curtis laughed thinly, touched his lips delicately with his fingers and winked at me. It was a sly, approving wink, done deliberately so the bull-necked Jonathan could not possibly miss it. Jonathan's face purpled and his huge hands knotted at his sides. He looked from me to Curtis, then back at me again, his neck swelling.

"No you don't!" he said furiously. "I'll break your back before I'll let you elbow me out of this. I'll choke it out of you. I'll . . ."

He dived at me. I chopped frantically at his face as he came in, but I might just as well have been punching at a frozen side of beef. He lowered his head and took both blows on the forehead. Then the room exploded around me.

The first shock of his hammering fists drove all sight from my eyes, but I could still feel. It was like being thrown helplessly in a head-on car crash, thudding in pain. I went down. My elbow struck a hard edge and the agony was worse than death itself. I didn't lose consciousness, but I was sure swimming in a murky twilight.

CHAPTER THREE

Deadly Lady

I FELT myself lifted into a chair. Voices murmured indistinctly. Something cool and damp was gently drawn over my face. As I opened my eyes a girl rose from the arm of a chair and smiled down at me.

Her white sharkskin suit was tailored, but it only emphasized the femininity of her slim, clean lines. She was ash-blonde and indescribably lovely. She had a wide, lifting mouth, a mouth for kissing.

"You should be very grateful to Curt." Her voice was warm and throaty, and it

seemed to flow around me. "He stopped Jonathan before any real damage was done." Her grey eyes clouded. "He's an animal. He should be caged. Would you call him human, Curt? Would you?"

Curtis stood there, smiling, dangling a black automatic from his forefinger by the trigger guard. "Of course he's human, my sweet. He's just a little impetuous, that's all. Undisciplined. He won't leave you alone, Mr. Foran, as long as he thinks there's a chance at that will. Shall we strike our bargain now, Mr. Foran?"

In feeble anger, I started, "I told you—"

He held up his hand and leaned closer, his eyes glittering. "Just tell me one thing, and the money is yours. Tell me this one thing, and then you can sell the will to Jonathan if you wish. Which of us, Jonathan or me, did my father name in the will?"

"You can make yourself over a half-million dollars, Mr. Foran," said the girl, softly persuasive.

"Of course he can, Edda."

I leaned back in the chair and closed my eyes. "It's no use keeping after me," I said wearily. "I haven't seen the will. I don't want to see it. I don't want anything to do with it. Now will you believe me?" I opened my eyes and looked at the girl. "I don't know anything about it," I repeated.

Curtis dropped the gun into his side pocket. "I think, my sweet," he said thoughtfully, "that Mr. Foran should come along with us. To protect him from Jonathan, of course."

I said stubbornly, "I'm not going with anybody. I'm staying here."

His eyes got long and thin, and the amber in them was a living fire. "You'll damn well come where I—"

"No, Curt!" Edda put her slim hand on his arm and looked down at me, shaking her head apologetically. She turned back to him. "That isn't the way to deal

with Mr. Foran. He'd merely become obstinate. And, furthermore, I'm not so sure he does know anything."

"I don't," I said sullenly. "I wish someone would start believing me for a change."

"You see, Curt? He doesn't know anything. Let him get in touch with this other man. If he doesn't, I'm sure the other man will get in touch with us himself. I think we should go now."

He stared at her, and suddenly he smiled. "Of course. You're quite right." He took his hat from the coffee table. He stopped at the door and looked back. "If I were you, Mr. Foran," he said softly, "I would keep my door locked. Jonathan was quite annoyed when I knocked him on the head and threw him out."

Edda said, "That animal!" smiled warningly at me and went out, followed by Curtis. The lock snicked behind them.

I pushed myself painfully out of the chair, went into the bathroom and looked at myself in the mirror. My face was shockingly normal. I had expected to find it battered almost beyond recognition, but there was nothing but a small bruise on one cheekbone and another on the rim of the jaw beneath it. Yet I had a headache big enough for two heads.

Iron man Foran, I thought sourly. Good old cast-iron man Foran, the horizontal wonder.

I went into the kitchen and poured myself a double shot of brandy. It left me gasping, leaking at the eyes, and there was a ringing in my ears.

But even in the shape I was in, there was one nagging thought that kept me from back-firing into a ball game or a trip to the zoo. I *had* to get hold of that will. It was the only way out for me. I could plunk it down on Captain Hemstead's desk, and I'd be out of the tall grass. Of course, there was the small detail of turning Benny Axt over to him, too, but if I had the will, I'd also have Benny Axt—or

be stone cold dead in the market. The ringing in my ears persisted, and I took another drink of brandy. It made me feel much better. I even thought of a nice epitaph they could put on my headstone: Here Lies Roy Foran, aged 29, The Guy They Couldn't Do That To. It was a noble thought.

I pushed open the kitchen door and discovered the ringing wasn't in my head at all—it was in the telephone. I'll say this for the brandy—it made me feel strong as a horse.

I snatched up the phone and growled, "Now what?"

BENNY AXT'S voice was so hot, eager and close that he might almost have been standing at my elbow. "I just saw them leave, pally. How'd it go? Is it all set?"

"No. I told you I wouldn't deal, didn't I? Well, I didn't."

"Sure, pally, sure. But maybe you ain't figured this out right. As long's we got that will, we can squeeze them forever. There's millions in it for us, pally, millions! And when you got that much dough, you don't have to be afraid of nobody, cops included. Nobody with a million bucks ever goes to jail, pally. You can hang the mistletoe on your coattail and have the time of your life. Get me? Think it over."

"I want to talk to you, Benny."

"You are talking to me."

"I mean, I want to see you. I don't want to say it over the phone."

"Nuts to that! The place is crawling with cops. That'd be smart, wouldn't it! That'd be . . ." His voice turned suddenly shrill. "You wouldn't be thinking of ratting on me, pally, would you? Turn me in, and you'll be right in there with me. I got that fixed."

"I'm not turning you in, Benny. I just want to get the will, that's all. Those guys aren't going to turn that much money over

to me unless I show them the will, are they?"

He laughed nastily. "Don't you worry about the will, pally. It's where they won't find it on me if you turn me in. You just get the dough. I'll take care of the rest of it. You don't know from nothing, and that's all you gotta know. And no funny stuff!" His voice skirled hysterically. "This is my big chance. You mess it up and I'll cut you down. Throw your guts and I swear I'll put the torch to you. I—"

I hung up in the midst of his frenzy and froze with my hand on the phone. Of course! If Benny had seen the Winthrops leave, he was close by, probably across the street. I darted to the window and peered through the slits of the venetian blind. There was an apartment house across the street, but he couldn't have had an apartment there, not with the housing shortage. But he could look down from the roof. There was no phone on the roof, but there would be a pay phone in the basement.

I clipped a ready-made bow tie onto my collar, swung into a jacket and bounded down the stairs. It was a good idea—but it didn't last long. It didn't last even as far as the front door. Benny had said the place was crawling with cops. I didn't even have to look to know he was right. Hemstead would cover me like a coat of paint. I swore. If he left me alone I could clean it up for him, but he had me nailed to the wall.

You know what a psychologist can do with a rat? He can teach the rat to jump at a door that will open to a full-course dinner. Then one day the psychologist will have the door fixed so it won't open when the rat jumps at it. The rat then gradually goes crazy. I felt just like that rat. All the open doors I had ever known were suddenly barred to me, and I was jumping and jumping, and nothing would open. I began to get a little scared. I

knew where to go and what to get—but they wouldn't let me do it. I wanted to help them—but they wouldn't believe me. If only they'd leave me alone for an hour, a half-hour, fifteen minutes maybe—but they wouldn't. Their eyes would be there and they would be watching and noting every jump the rat made.

Roy Foran, rat. There was no one to talk to but myself, and that could be the beginning of the end.

As I stepped uncertainly out to the sidewalk, someone touched my arm and murmured, "Poor Mr. Foran."

I turned. It was Edda Winthrop. Her grey eyes were sympathetic, and her mouth smiled, understandingly, intimately.

"You look so woebegone," she said. "What's the matter, Mr. Foran?" She didn't let me answer. She pressed my arm. "I know. I'm afraid of Jonathan myself. And Curt, despite his polished facets, has all the instincts of a wolverine. Neither of them is really civilized. I got rid of Curt, because I felt you were a kind of innocent bystander. Do you want to tell me about it? There's a cocktail bar on the corner. I'll treat you to a Manhattan. Perhaps," her voice lifted gaily as she slipped her arm through mine, "I can call off the dogs and you can slip back into your peaceful little niche again."

"What peaceful little niche is that?" I asked. "The family vault?"

"You're bitter. Oh, you mustn't be bitter!"

"I'm not bitter. I—I just wish I could see my way out of this," I blurted. "I didn't want anything to do with it, but now I'm all mixed up in it, and I've got to . . ."

She pulled gently at my arm. "A Manhattan?" She smiled angelically. "Poor Mr. Foran."

"Not as poor as all that," I said gruffly, asserting my manhood. "I've been in jams before." I didn't try to invent any. I just tried to look intrepid, like a man who'd been in jams before, like Humphrey

Bogart. I'd never even walked down the street before with a girl as patrician and lovely as Edda Winthrop.

THE COCKTAIL BAR was called the Oasis, and someone had painted a camel on the plate-glass window, but aside from that their liquor was as good as anybody's in the city.

We took a rear booth, but instead of letting me sit across from her—the style to which I am accustomed—she smiled and patted the leatherette beside her.

"So we won't have to shout at one another," she said. She propped her chin on her hands. "You know, I really have a lot of influence with Curt. He has a lot of faith in my judgment."

"He's a smart boy," I said, looking at the cameo of her ivory profile.

"He's not, really. What is your name, Mr. Foran? I feel so like a librarian, calling you Mr. Foran all the time."

"Royal. Most people call me Roy."

She grimaced. "It reminds one of working pants—corduroy. Roy. I'll call you Royal. But actually, don't you really know anything about this alleged will?"

"Only . . ." I stopped. "Only from the photographs I saw," I finished lamely. I didn't want to tell even her about Benny Axt.

Her eyes were quick and shrewd. "You were going to say something else."

"No. No, honestly I wasn't."

The waiter came with the Manhattans and she paid him. I had my glass raised when she said, "I think you were. I think you're concealing something. I don't think you're being frank. You'll have to be frank if I'm to help you, Royal."

"I am being frank," I said. "That's all there is to it."

"You're sure that's all you want to say?"

"Sure I'm sure."

"I think not."

She leaned into me and touched my

side. I looked down and my jaws fell agape. It wasn't her hand she had touched me with, it was a gun. A short-barreled, short-tempered-looking gun, and she held it steadily into the softness of my side just under the ribs.

"You haven't been frank," she said reproachfully. "I can't spend any more time with you. It's too important. Surely you can see how important it is. You're an idiot. All blackmailers are idiots. Now get up and walk slowly to the back of this place where the shuffleboard is. To the right of the shuffleboard is a door. Go through it. I'll be right behind you."

In a kind of humorous despair, I said, "This is another one of those things they can't do to me. Suppose I screamed?"

"Then, Mr. Foran," she said promptly, "I'd shoot you very painfully and you'd be in the hospital for a long time. And," her voice sharpened, "when you came out of the hospital, we'd still be waiting for you. Are you going to be sensible, or do I have to take you through that back door?"

I chopped suddenly sideways with my right hand and slapped the gun flat against the back of the booth. I hadn't even time to grab for it when a wet towel—the kind of towel waiters use to mop the table—snapped under my chin and hoisted me two inches off the bench, with me clawing at it, fighting it. The gun stabbed into my ribs again.

"This time," said Edda sharply, "you march. Now, move!"

The towel was withdrawn. I slid out of the booth and, when I looked around, there was no one there. The waiter was innocently standing by the juke box, slapping at flies with his towel. He wasn't even looking in our direction.

I walked stiffly through the cocktail room and into the long narrow room that housed the shuffleboard. As she had said, there was a door to the right of it, and it hung open about an inch.

"I know as well as you do," she whispered behind me, "that the police are all around. But I know better than you do *where* they are. They are on either angle of the corner and they cannot help you. We are going through those back yards to the street beyond. Now, march!"

The backyards were criss-crossed with wash lines and divided by high board fences, but through each fence was a gate. She followed not more than three feet behind me, ducking under the hanging wash as I did, not losing sight of me for a moment. The houses here were so close together that the alley between them was not more than three feet wide. There wasn't a chance for me to get away from her. We went out to the street between the last two houses.

CHAPTER FOUR

Too Many Corpses

THE car, an innocuous Chevvy sedan, was parked at the curb, and leaning against the right door, his hat pulled down over his eyes, was Benny Axt. He had a newspaper in his hand and the newspaper was resting on the sill of the opened window.

He hailed me merrily. "I seen you go into that deadfall with the mouse, pally, and I thought you might be wanting to lose your tail, so I ducked around this side, and what do I find in this heap but my old friend, Louis Schutt, all set for a snatch. So I ups to him. He's tame now. Hop in, pally, he's gonna chauffeur us around while we have our little barber."

Out of stiff lips, I tried to warn him about the girl behind me, but the words wouldn't come. When he finally got the idea, he whirled, but it was too late. She put two bullets into him as neatly as she would have basted a hem, one over each eye. Her gun didn't make any more noise than a man spitting. He fell straight for-

ward against some garbage cans, his arms curled under him, somehow pathetic, killer though he was.

But the moment of pity was only flickering, and it burned out in the flood of horror that engulfed me. If Benny was gone, the will was gone—and only the will could help me. I went down on my knees beside him.

"Benny," I cried. "For God's sake, Benny, where is it? Where's the will? Where is it, Benny?"

I lifted him in my arms and shook him. Something fell against my knee, but Benny was as dead as Cheops. The girl kicked furiously at my back.

"Get in the car! Get in there quick. Quick, I said!"

I looked stupidly up at her, startled at the savagery in her voice. Her face was contorted. In another instant she would have shot me, too. I laid Benny back on the sidewalk, and as I did I felt the object that had fallen against my knee. It was his gun, small, flat and cold. I palmed it and got hastily to my feet as Louis Schutt charged out of the car. He hurled me into the back seat as Edda scrambled in behind the wheel. He leaped in beside her, barely making it as the car shot from the curb. He reached over the back of the seat, hooked his fingers in my collar and, twisting, forced me brutally to my knees on the floor. He slapped the back of my neck with his fist and the floor seemed to surge up. My nose, teeth and chin went numb at the impact, but I clung to the gun as if it were a life preserver in a stormy sea.

Once out of that deadly back street, Edda slowed down to a soberer and less conspicuous pace. Louis Schutt's heavy hand was on the back of my head, grinding my face into the dusty carpet. I managed to slip the gun into my pants pocket. There was no chance of using it in the car, and if I kept it in my hand they might find it when they hauled me to my feet.

In the state of mind I was in, though, I doubt that I'd have used a tommy gun if I'd had one. The death of Benny Axt behind the tavern—the tavern into which the police had seen me go—left me out on a limb three-quarters sawed through. I didn't have the will, and I didn't know where it was. I was being taken to Curtis Winthrop under guns, but the guns would be merciful compared to what, I knew, I could expect from him. He was as feral as a leopard, as conscienceless as a butcher knife. He wanted the will, and he thought I had it. No sacrificial goat, even if endowed with the agonies of human imagination, could possibly have felt the despair that ate into me. Louis Schutt's hand on the back of my head, seemed like the hand of an executioner.

THE CAR stopped with a jerk, and I could hear the spray of flying gravel. I lurched into the foot of the front seat. Louis slapped the back of my neck again, and my eyes danced in my head. Edda's voice seemed to come from a shimmering distance.

"Tie this around his eyes, Louis. And tie his hands. He's much too valuable to take chances."

Louis slapped me again to keep me quiet, then wound a kerchief over my eyes. He tied my hands with another kerchief and, hooking his hand through that, hauled me out of the car. He stood me up and held me there.

I heard Edda's light but tremulous voice again. "I brought him, darling." A pause. Then in bitter reproach, "Is that the best kiss you can give me?"

"Don't bother me now. Beat it, Louis. Tell Lace thanks from me. Go ahead, beat it, beat it! We'll take him inside, Edda."

I heard the car snarl off in reverse, and a heavy, wrenching hand took me by the bond across my wrists and jerked me, stumbling, up an uneven path, up a set of steps and thrust me into a room.

Fingers hooked into the kerchief behind my ears and jerked it roughly from my eyes. I gaped.

It wasn't Curtis Winthrop. It was Jonathan. There was a bluish bruise on the side of his forehead where Curtis had hit him with the gun, but he was grinning. Edda clung to his arm, looking into his face, and in her eyes was the despair of a woman who loved more than she was loved.

"Jonny!" she said. "Jonny! Look at me, Jonny! I brought him to you, Jonny, just as you asked. Jonny, aren't you even going to look at me?"

Still grinning, he pushed her behind him.

"Sure, I'll look at you," he said. "But we got a little unfinished business with Mr. Smart Boy Foran first."

I was still a little groggy from those clips on the back of the neck Louis Schutt had given me, but there was no mistaking the look of pleasure in his eyes. His eyes were brown, light brown—too light, almost the hard amber of Curtis's eyes. An animal Edda had called him.

"We have a few things to talk over with Mr. Foran first," he said softly. "Don't we, Mr. Foran?" He slashed the back of his hand across my face. "Don't we, Mr. Foran?" His voice was still soft.

There were tears of pain in my eyes, but I tried to keep them out of my voice. "*Did* have," I said. "*Did*." I managed a grin. "Until sweetheart here shot down the only man who knew where the Winthrop will was hidden. He was a little burglar named Benny Axt. He was robbing your father's safe when the old man walked in and dropped dead. He panicked and grabbed up the first thing he could lay his hands on—a box. The box containing your father's holographic will. I don't know where he hid it, Jonathan, but maybe somebody else does. Maybe it'll turn up again. And when it does, maybe you won't get a cent out of your father's estate. Maybe it will all go to the S.P.C.A. And she shot the only

man dead who knew where the will is!"

I laughed wildly, like an idiot. I didn't even feel sane. All I knew was that he had been diddled, and I felt a maniacal glee.

"She shot him, you damn fool!" I chortled. "And there isn't a chance you can get it out of me. Ask her. Go ahead, ask her!"

He whirled on her. He never bothered to conceal what was in his mind. It came out in his face like an eight-column banner. It flamed there like raw murder. She stepped back away from him, her lips drained.

"He had a gun, Jonny! He would have shot. He had a gun. I had to shoot him!" Frantically, she tried to recover. "But he's lying, Jonny! He knows where the will is. Look Jonny. I love you, Jonny. Look what I've done for you. You asked me to do it, and I did it without question. He's lying, Jonny! He's lying!"

"You shot that guy?" he demanded through his teeth. I could see the muscles gather across his shoulders.

"I—I—No! No, Jonny, no!"

HE LEAPED at her. She tried to fire with the gun in her hand, but he twisted it brutally from her fingers. He seized her by the hair, and she beat at his face with small, futile fingers. I tried to get at the gun in my pocket, but it had slipped down to the bottom and the kerchief stopped my reaching fingers. He forced her to her knees. I could see by his bulging face that he was going to kill her. I jumped at him. He lashed at me with his foot. He caught me across the knees, and my legs shot out from under me as if cut off. I hit the floor with the side of my head, my shoulder hardly cushioning the impact. I drifted off into a kind of rosy Never-Never Land.

Dimly, I heard another voice, purring and triumphant, say, "You murderous snake!"

Then, out of nowhere, in the middle of the room, was Curtis Winthrop. But he didn't behave like Curtis Winthrop. He was bent over in the middle, and he lurched toward me as if drunk, his hands clasped across his belly. He staggered into a gaily chintzed wing chair, fell to the floor and flung out his hand, upsetting the fire set with his hand. It clattered across the hearth with a metallic clash. Then I remembered hearing a gunshot before that. At the moment there didn't seem to be much connection. Curtis lay curled on the Numdah rug before the fireplace, and the poker lay at my feet. I felt drunk, and I giggled.

Across the room I heard the door slam, and as I languidly raised my eyes I saw Jonathan lunge at it. He wrenched it open and plunged into the hallway.

Curtis rolled his glazing eyes up to where I stood now, swaying.

"Sucker!" he whispered, "Sucker!"

To my horror, a bright gush of blood spread across the ivory white of the Numdah beneath his chin. He seemed to flatten, and no one had to tell me he was dead.

Whatever else this house was, it was certainly not soundproof. I could hear the staccato thunder of footsteps on the stairways, then the drumming of feet on the floor overhead. That was Jonathan after Edda. It registered only dimly. The footsteps scampered into a corner. I could tell it was a corner, because one pair stopped and the other pair advanced slowly, as if Jonathan were closing in.

There was a moment of silence, then two thin, sharp cracks, as if someone had broken a piece of lath.

The footsteps came across the ceiling, and then slowly, draggingly, down the stairs.

I tried for the gun in my pocket again, but the kerchief at my wrists still held my reaching fingers. I snatched up the poker from the floor at my feet and darted to the door. The door opened, and, still

light-headed, giggling, I brought the poker down across the shoulders of Edda Winthrop. She fell without a sound, her ash-blond hair spilled around her like the silk of shucked corn.

CAPTAIN HEMSTEAD'S face was grim. It was both grim and puzzled, but grim because he was puzzled. He didn't like to be confused, and he was scowling.

Me, I was scowling, too. I was sore. I was sore on the back of the neck; I was sore because he should have trusted me and hadn't; I was sore because—well, I had never met a beautiful girl like Edda Winthrop before, and she had taken me. I was abysmally sore.

But Captain Hemstead beat me to the punch. "You're still not out in the clear, Foran," he growled. "That's a very fancy story. And she may have shot the guy. But you were mixed up in this. Where's this alleged will? Where is it? Show it to me, and maybe I'll believe you. Go ahead, show it to me!"

He didn't look happy. He knew he had scored, but he wasn't happy all the same. We had been friends.

"Show me the will, Roy," he said dully, in the tones of a man who had been betrayed.

"It's here," I said—praying. "It's here. Judging from what Benny Axt said. *'It's where they won't find it on me if you turn me in.'* That's what he said to me, Dave. And he had me rigged to take the rap with him. The will *must* be here. Will you help me find it?"

He pushed himself up out of the chair. "Okay, Roy," he said woodenly.

We searched. He took the bedroom, and I took the living room. He took the kitchen, and I took the bathroom. We went under the rugs and behind the pictures. And in the end we had exactly what we started with—nothing.

He put his hands on his hips and looked

ANY CORPSE IN A STORM

around the living room. His face was dark. He didn't want to give up. He didn't want to admit that he had been wrong about me.

"Did you look under the sofa?" he asked.

I nodded numbly.

"Behind the Winthrop desk?"

He could have grabbed the heart out of my mouth, "The what!"

"The Winthrop desk. That's what they call that kind of desk—a Governor Winthrop desk. Did you look behind it."

He had to keep me from tipping it over, spilling it on the floor in my eagerness. And there's where we found it—pasted to the back with four slabs of chewing gum. In the middle of each bit of chewing gum was the perfect print of Benny Axt's thumb—the Winthrop Will.

He cut it carefully at each corner, leaving the gum for the experts from headquarters. He put on his glasses and held the paper at arm's length, the better to read it, his face narrow and suspicious. Halfway through he began to chuckle; then he broke into a guffaw. He held it out to me.

"Read it," he said. "Go ahead and read it." His mouth twisted misanthropically. His laugh was harsh.

I took it. Here was the document for which Jonathan had killed Curtis, and for which Edda had killed Jonathan—the document that might have given her the Winthrop millions—had she not stooped to killing.

For it said: "... and to my sons, Jonathan and Curtis, no matter how undeserving, I leave my estate, which, I hope, they may enjoy to the day they die, and thereafter may it be used for the work of the S.P.C.A. in the rehabilitation of unfortunate animals."

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It wasn't funny.

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WILLIAM BRANDON

(Continued from page 72)

"I haven't got any money to send you back there," the chief said. There was some doubt now in his voice and he squeezed his lower lip between a thumb and finger. "New Mexico will have to come and get you if they want you, and they say they don't."

Pascal breathed deeply, his breath catching in his throat, and he said at last, "Look, I've got the money—it's in this tin box. It makes proof enough, doesn't it? It's all in the old-time big bills, that's proof enough, isn't it? That's proof enough to send me back, isn't it? Look at it."

The chief opened the tackle box and then his eyes raised to Pascal's face and Pascal saw nothing in the box but a bed of fine grey ashes.

"T'S frightful," Miss Williams said, and shuddered. "They say he insists there's a spirit after him. Oh, I knew the poor man was heading for a nervous breakdown. You could see at a glance he wasn't well."

"I'll tell you this much," Mr. Pelgen said, "I'm glad he's gone from here. I don't know what 'twas he told the police, but I do know he wa'n't up to no good. I know blamed well he lit all them fires himself."

"Of course he did," Miss Williams' mother said. "Oh, I watched pretty closely, you can bet, after the first couple of fires broke out. I knew he was crazy, especially after I got a look at that friend of his. I got a look at that one last night."

"A friend?" Miss Williams said.

"That's right," her mother said. "A funny-looking little man all wrapped up in an Indian blanket. He came up the stairs and walked into Mr. Pascal's room, just as if he was expected—and it was right after that I smelled fire!"

MYSTERY'S DARK PORTALS

(Continued from page 74)

Johnny reached out his hand then to touch Willie. But there wasn't anything there. Nothing. He reached out a little farther, where the cable ran through the car, and he felt it, slowly moving as it lifted the car upward.

Johnny didn't wait for the car to get to his floor. He grabbed that cable and reversed the motion and took the car down to the ground floor.

A voice there spoke to him, a strange voice. "You shouldn't have done that, Mister," the voice said. "You shouldn't have taken the car up by yourself."

Johnny's voice was kind of strangled when he spoke. "Where's Willie?" he said. "The old elevator operator. You know—Willie."

"Old colored fellow?" the voice asked. "Hell, he died three years ago."

MAYBE one other detail ought to be added here to round out the story. Every time Johnny tells that tale something strange happens to the big German Shepherd at his feet. It's as though she senses somehow what Johnny's talking about and wants to add her two cents. Because just as Johnny finishes each time, she gives a little worried whine and looks around anxiously, as though to make sure that no one's smiling.

Well, that's the kind of strange story we pick up now and then here at **DIME MYSTERY**. We thought you'd like us to pass it on to you, along with the other thrill-packed yarns you'll find in this issue of good old DM. Hope you enjoyed it, and that you'll be around two months from now to pick up the next issue of **DIME MYSTERY**—that will be the October issue—wherein we're featuring yarns by Francis K. Allan, Tahnage Powell, John D. MacDonald and many other of your favorite mystery authors. See you September 2nd.

—The Editor.



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ONE MAN'S POISON

(Continued from page 78)

uh—died. My father never would change the name. He always said that Harith kind of started him out in this business. In a way, that is. He was quite sentimental about it." He giggled.

"Oh," said Mr. Petten. "Well. See you again."

The young man raised his hand. "Good-bye, my friend."

Waddling down the street, Mr. Petten was quite pleased with himself. He blew a toneless tune through fat, pursed lips. The vials clinked pleasantly in his pocket. He was thinking he'd turned a nice piece of business. Two murders, and at fifty dollars a throw. "Afterwards," he told himself, "he can whistle for the rest. But he won't whistle loud. Not that one. Not when he's an accessory before the fact." He smiled grimly.

Back in his office, with the door securely locked, he uncorked the blue vial and poured its contents down his throat.

AFTER Mr. Petten left, the dark young man returned slowly to the rear room of his shop. He thought it unlikely that he would ever see Mr. Petten again, certainly not after he swallowed the contents of the vial—poison. He thought that very probably Mr. Petten wasn't entirely honest, anyway. Even alive, he probably wouldn't have have paid the remainder of his bill. Shaking his head, the dark young man bent again over the big ledger. A few minutes later he took an empty statement blank from the drawer of the table. In a neat, orderly hand he wrote:

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He got out the telephone book, leafed through it, and carefully copied out the address.

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MULTIPURPOSE USES!—spray on wall, ceiling, beams, brick, stone, plaster, etc. Also spray on woodwork, etc., with Vibro-Sprayer.



SPRAYS FURNITURE!—look the thing up! sprays new chairs, and the old ones, too! (See page 10.)



SPRAYS STAIRS!—spray the wall of stairs, concrete, brick, wood, etc. (See page 10.)



INSECT CONTROL!—spray on any surface of car, window, etc. (See page 10.)



VEHICLE MAINTENANCE!—spray the car, window, etc. (See page 10.)



GARDEN PEST CONTROL!—spray on flowers, plants and shrubs. (See page 10.)

FOSTER
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